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"The Southern Heart Still Throbs": Caroline E. Janney and Partisan Memory's Grip on the Post-Civil War Nation

Heather L. Clancy '15
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

"Memory is not a passive act," writes Caroline E. Janney in the prologue of her 2013 book *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation*. Rather, it is a deliberate process. Our nation's history has been shaped by countless hands in innumerable ways, and the story of our civil war is no exception. In *Remembering the Civil War*, Janney seeks to turn our eyes once again onto the players, large and small, who shaped what came to be the accepted narrative of the conflict, from its inception through the 1930s and even bleeding through the Civil Rights Era and into the present. By examining the Civil War generation and its children, Janney sheds light on the evolution of an often vitriolic and always contested Civil War memory, one jaggedly split between reunion and reconciliation, progress and precedent, image and truth. Janney's postwar South is not only un-Reconstructed, but un-Reconciled. The world of postwar memory construction that Janney paints for the reader is not David Blight's largely uncomplicated portrait of a willful reconciliation found through a common (white) racial identity. Instead, she offers a messy but intriguing alternative: the clasping of hands across the bloody chasm, but accompanied by clenched teeth and bitter resentment.

Keywords

Civil War, memory, reconciliation, Reconstruction, reunion, veteran

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Caroline E. Janney and Partisan Memory’s Grip on the Post-Civil War Nation

Heather Clancy

“Memory is not a passive act,” writes Caroline E. Janney in the prologue of her 2013 book *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation*. Rather, it is a deliberate process. Our nation’s history has been shaped by countless hands in innumerable ways, and the story of our civil war is no exception. In *Remembering the Civil War*, Janney seeks to turn our eyes once again onto the players, large and small, who shaped what came to be the accepted narrative of the conflict, from its inception through the 1930s and even bleeding through the Civil Rights Era and into the present. By examining the Civil War generation and its children, Janney sheds light on the evolution of an often vitriolic and always contested Civil War memory, one jaggedly split between reunion and reconciliation, progress and precedent, image and truth. Janney’s postwar South is not only un-Reconstructed, but un-Reconciled. The world of postwar memory construction that Janney paints for the reader is not David Blight’s largely uncomplicated portrait of a willful reconciliation found through a common (white) racial identity. Instead, she offers a messy but intriguing alternative: the clasping of hands across the bloody chasm, but accompanied by clenched teeth and bitter resentment.

At the crux of her evaluation is her differentiation between “reunion” and “reconciliation.” The former was easily accepted by Confederate veterans, explains Janney, for although it was the bitter result of a military surrender,

it was not automatically emasculating or subjugating. Reconciliation, though, implied an alarmingly personal and yet simultaneously collective surrender, not only of armies, but also of spirit, bravery, and cause. The fight between Union and Confederate veterans as well as their descendants for control over the Civil War narrative, then, was in reality for legitimacy.

Janney treats gender, race, region, and generation with care, assessing not only each category but also the interplay between them. Janney is also careful to distinguish between civilian and military wartime and postwar experiences and the roles that both groups played in shaping Civil War memory. Her discussion of feminized memory—the part that women, and particularly white Southern women, played in this process is skillful. Her argument that women saw in popular Civil War memory a chance for pseudo-political engagement and even agency is intriguing, as is her theory that veterans of both sides in the decades following the war merely wore a façade of reconciliation and allowed their politically non-threatening wives, sisters, and daughters to fight the battles for memory supremacy in their place.

Janney's analysis of the cyclical nature of Civil War memory is both clear and generally concise. Her argument falters noticeably only once, in her epilogue. Here she comments on the denial by “most Americans [and] especially whites” of the central role that slavery played in the coming of the war. She does this despite having reassured the reader repeatedly throughout the book that northerners have never once been fully taken in by the sickly sweet charm of the ex-Confederacy's Lost Cause. But if a majority of Americans accept the Lost Cause view of slavery as unrelated to the causes of the Civil War, then how can a Lost Cause interpretation of the war have “become increasingly marginalized”? This

one notable self-contradiction is Janney's sole faltering worthy of mention; nowhere else in the book does such a confusion of argument arise.

Remembering the Civil War paces the ground between history and mythos in a briar patch of passed down lore, seeking out kernels of truth. Ultimately, Janney comes to few definitive conclusions by her epilogue, but it is well that she does not. Just as "no single vision of the war could encompass the range of meanings and understandings such a vast American public found in the conflict," so too do we find ourselves adrift in a sea of contradictory historical narratives today. Although it can be tempting to view our Civil War past as just that, Janney's murkier look at the postbellum period leaves Sesquicentennial-era historians and historiophiles to wonder just how reconciled our divided past truly is. The bloody shirt may no longer be damp with the blood of our fellow citizens, but it would seem that the stains are still visible.