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Ambivalent about Tragedy: David Blight on Bruce Catton

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Abstract

November 19, 2013, marked a momentous day in the small Pennsylvania town of Gettysburg – the 150th anniversary of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. The 272 worded speech given four months after the Battle of Gettysburg assigned meaning to the intense fighting and death that had besieged the nation for two years. With the war’s end nowhere in sight, Lincoln directed the American people on how to fathom the tragedy that surrounded them, both figuratively and literally, at the dedication of the National Cemetery in 1863. 150 years after this speech, thousands gathered to celebrate and commemorate those few appropriate remarks Lincoln made at a time when the nation’s future was tragically uncertain. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, Gettysburg College, Civil War memory, David Blight, Bruce Catton, Fortenbaugh Memorial Lecture, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg Address

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Ambivalent about Tragedy: David Blight on Bruce Catton

NOVEMBER 21, 2013

By: Brianna Kirk, '15

November 19, 2013, marked a momentous day in the small Pennsylvania town of Gettysburg – the 150th anniversary of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. The 272 worded speech given four months after the Battle of Gettysburg assigned meaning to the intense fighting and death that had besieged the nation for two years. With the war’s end nowhere in sight, Lincoln directed the American people on how to fathom the tragedy that surrounded them, both figuratively and literally, at the dedication of the National Cemetery in 1863. 150 years after this speech, thousands gathered to celebrate and commemorate those few appropriate remarks Lincoln made at a time when the nation’s future was tragically uncertain.

David Blight delivered the [52nd Annual Fortenbaugh Memorial Lecture](#) on the historic anniversary of Lincoln’s speech. He chose to examine Bruce Catton and tragedy throughout his lecture, opening with a quote spoken by Catton in a Memorial Day speech in 1959: “Tragedy is not quite in key in the American spirit.” Catton, a well-known and popular Civil War author, meant that the mixing of two notes, American culture and tragedy, would rarely be melodious, if ever. Blight expanded on the quote during his lecture, posing large questions on how one defines ‘tragedy,’ and what meanings lay beneath that single word for Americans. Catton’s works on the Civil War were siren calls into the nation’s past, Blight noted, calling attention to the paradoxical stance of the war’s commercialization at the expense of the interpretation of its consequences, the immense tragedy of young men dying on battlefields.

Blight spoke of the ambivalence of Civil War memory in the American mind, the clashing notions of American exceptionalism and tragedy. Americans are not trained to view history in a tragic mindset; rather, war is romanticized, viewed as entertainment and used for economic profit. Catton found issue with that, and sought to “possess the truth” of the past instead of replace it because of the uncertainty of tragedy’s meaning.

Yet, even Catton, an advocate of viewing history with the human element of tragedy, could not define what, in fact, tragedy meant in the scope of American history. His efforts to draw attention to the lack of humanity in historical writing, the means of making sense out of the Civil War's sufferings, were done through commercialization. Blight pointed out via Avery Craven's review of Catton, that his work on the Civil War, presented with such "romance and glamour," found the war to be the nation's greatest tragedy, and hence did not grasp the "genuine meaning" of tragedy. Americans, Blight remarked, came to love war in times when war was no longer lovable.

David Blight's focus on tragedy through Bruce Catton shows how humanity is about triumph and failure, and how there is no better way to write history, the story of humanity, than with that human element of tragedy. The ability to make meaning out of suffering, out of tragedy, is impeccable. Abraham Lincoln did just that 150 years ago in the Gettysburg Address. He did not commercialize his words, nor boast of how his speech helped Americans internalize the meaning of the Civil War. Rather, the tragic undertones to his speech appealed to human emotion and each person's sense of humanity. Catton's *Glory Road*, which ended with the reading of the Gettysburg Address, purposely did not name President Lincoln as the speaker, but instead commented on how a man in a black frock coat rose with two sheets of paper in his hand, looked over the battlefields, and began to speak. That statement, with the focus not on Lincoln but rather on what happened at Gettysburg, Blight observed, was where tragedy was finally in key.