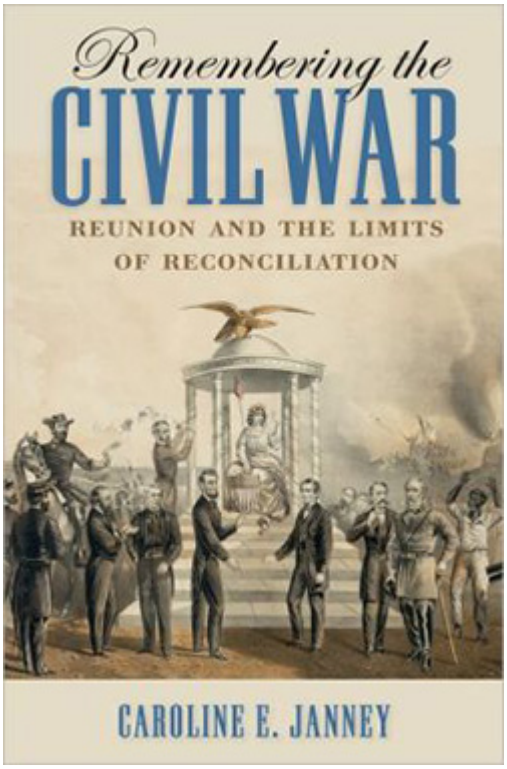
Reunion Without Reconciliation



In *Remembering the Civil War*, Purdue University historian Caroline Janney challenges the prevailing narrative of Civil War memory, which contends that turn-of-the-century whites in the North and South achieved a sincerely desired reconciliation by setting aside past antagonisms and embracing a racist memory of the war that omitted slavery and emancipation and extolled the white masculine virtues of battlefield courage and devotion to one's cause. In her skillful presentation that successfully synthesizes most of the recent literature on Civil War memory and delves deeply into personal papers, organizational records, government documents, and periodicals, Janney presents a Civil War generation unable to reconcile and unwilling to forget the causes for which they fought such a brutal and punishing war. Regarding the era as a pivotal moment in the history of the nation, the war generation feared that Americans born after the conflict would forget their sacrifice and worked tirelessly to shape the nation's memory of the Civil War through commemoration. Unwilling to sacrifice their cause to achieve reconciliation, the veterans and the women of the respective sections vigorously challenged any interpretation of the past seen as injurious to their cause. These efforts, she argues, inhibited any attempt at true reconciliation, a concept she finds troublingly elusive anyway, and too amorphous for the historian to accurately identify, define, and track.

The four primary legacies that Janney identifies as emerging after the Civil War are familiar. Among white southerners, the Lost Cause held sway, which banished slavery from the scene, defined the conflict as a constitutional

crisis, and honored southern soldiers for their bravery and fidelity to the southern nation in the face of overwhelming Yankee manpower and materiel advantages. For white northerners, the war had been fought to preserve the Union, with emancipation thrown in as a positive byproduct designed to crush the rebellion and eliminate the root cause of sectional strife. For most Unionists, slavery and race remained distinct issues, and celebrations of slavery's demise did not imply a belief in racial equality or support for black civil rights. For African Americans and some northern whites, however, emancipation took center stage as the means by which the Union had been saved and the nation reborn in a true spirit of freedom. Lastly, the reconciliationist legacy—predicated on celebrating the American qualities of courage and loyal devotion to one's cause—emerged periodically and sporadically and gained the greatest traction with the generation of Americans born after the Civil War. Poignantly, Janney reminds us that these legacies, while useful generalizations, were never clear-cut or static. In fact, individual and collective memories of the war's meaning "were continually being created, negotiated, and renegotiated" (10). Furthermore, remembrances frequently incorporated aspects of two, three, or all four of the legacies simultaneously. Ultimately, there proved to be no compelling reason for either side to surrender its cause. Reunion—the North's principal war aim—had been accomplished when the Confederacy capitulated, and southerners never contested this outcome. But the war left deep feelings of bitterness and resentment on both sides, and a true desire for reconciliation never emerged during the war generation's lifetime, and certainly not by 1900. For them, reunion was enough.

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Janney argues that true reconciliation required a shared memory of the war that both sides agreed on—and that this shared understanding simply never existed. She regards the outpourings of reconciliationist sentiment common at "Blue-Gray lovefests" (a term somewhat caustically applied to Union-Confederate gatherings) as having been overblown by a popular press looking for a good story, and hollow gestures at any rate. In probing the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century façade of reconciliation, she finds northerners and southerners feeling extremely wary of the other's intentions and steadfastly willing to rise and challenge any memorial, oration, or textbook that tarnished their memory of the Civil War and the cause for which they had fought. Whatever appearance of reconciliation emerged around the turn of the century was constructed on the unspoken agreement to omit unresolved issues, such as the cause of the war, how the war was waged, or the treatment of prisoners of war. "True, heartfelt reconciliation," she writes, "was rare indeed" (162).

If reconciliation proved difficult for the war veterans, Janney asserts that it proved impossible for women who lacked the shared experience of military

service and the political or commercial incentives to at least appear to reconcile. She shows that northern and southern women—especially the latter, who remained the principal purveyors of the Lost Cause and Confederate history—proved especially hostile to the demonstrations of the brotherhood of war put on at the veterans' gatherings and actively sought to hinder them. Women of both sections adamantly and vociferously rejected any reconciliationist gesture as a cardinal violation of the memory of their sacrifice. Even when northern and southern women worked together on common causes, such as temperance, their alliances never demanded that they abandon their view of the Civil War. In fact, some southern reformers used their sectional identity to encourage other women from the South to join in social movements, arguing that they were in fact respectable outlets for women's energies. Interestingly, Janney's research reveals that northern and southern men often praised these women when they assumed aggressive stances against reconciliation, providing further indication that the Blue-Gray lovefests amounted to little more than show.

This book is a worthy addition to the growing body of literature concerning the formation and expression of Civil War memory. It also provides a useful synthesis of the current literature. Historians of the period will find important counterpoints offered on several major points of historiographical consensus. Among the most notable are her contentions that the fifteen years following Appomattox were not a period of hibernation, but a pivotal moment when memories of the war formed and took root in both sections; that white southerners did not view President Abraham Lincoln as a friend of the South and did not lament his assassination; that President Andrew Johnson did not squander an opportunity to remake the South through his lenient reconstruction policies; that Confederate nationalism was a potent force that survived the war and served as the basis for the creation of a distinct regional identity; that white supremacy did not foster reconciliation, and that the Spanish-American War failed to accomplish a true reconciliation between the North and South. Her arguments are well supported in most cases, but she does tend to overstep her evidence when she asserts that Lincoln's murder "shaped the course of Reconstruction, paving the way for Radical Republicans and nurturing the rising momentum of Confederate memory" (42). There is no compelling evidence offered to draw this broad conclusion. Also, after repeatedly warning historians against conflating terms, she conflates "Liberal Republicanism" and "reconciliation" when she claims the former's failure to win the presidency in 1872 demonstrated a lack of feeling for the latter. While Liberal Republicanism certainly contained reconciliationist strains, this was not its primary message, and its electoral defeat should not be solely ascribed to a lack of feeling between the sections. Janney is correct in arguing that reconciliation is a difficult concept for historians to measure. For that matter, so also is its absence. This is a persuasively argued and well-written book that effectively challenges the traditional narrative of Civil War memory. However, without quantitative measurements, which are problematic in their own right, there is simply no way to know if the voices Janney brings to our attention represent the majority opinion, or simply express the intensely held views of a

very vocal minority.

If a single vision of what the Civil War meant is the standard by which we should gauge reconciliation, then it appears that true reconciliation remains elusive even today. Janney argues that the Union cause became a victim of its own success; she is probably correct. The United States endured the challenge of civil war and emerged from this conflict a reunited country that stood on the doorstep of world power by the end of the nineteenth century. For the South, the former Confederate states were restored to the Union and white southerners embraced their American-ness at the same time that they used the memory of the Confederacy, divested of slavery, to carve out their own distinct regional identity. Unlike the Union, the Confederacy remains suspended in time, forever affixed to the Civil War. For many, both North and South, the "Confederacy *was* the Civil War" and remains so today (10). But no matter how hard the "heritage not hate" crowd may try, slavery cannot be erased from the Confederate past, just as the Confederacy cannot be separated from the war. For some the Confederate battle flag is an enduring symbol of southern distinctiveness and independence. But for others, the flag conjures memories of rebellion, racism, and injustice. The flag, like the war itself, is many things to many people, and will likely remain so for some time to come. In fact, Americans may never agree on what the war meant or how it should be properly remembered or even celebrated. If so, it seems that reconciliation, by Janney's standard, remains a long way off. Of course, even if Americans still cannot agree on what the war meant, those who lived through the war would probably be pleased to know that we care enough to remember and to continue to disagree about what the Civil War was all about.