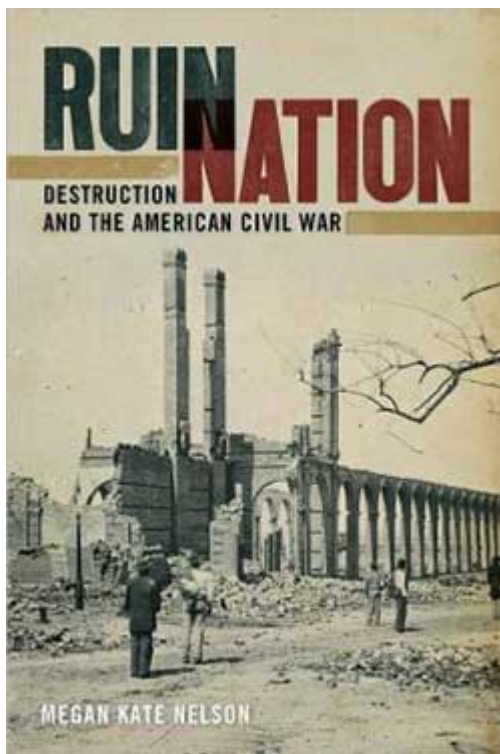


Battlefields, Bodies, and the Built Environment



Thomas A. Chambers, *Memories of War: Visiting Battlegrounds and Bonefields in the Early American Republic*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2012. 232 pp., \$29.95.

In two new books about the landscape of war, some of the most memorable sources are images of people, not of places. A verbal portrait captures Ezra Buel in 1819, as he removes his shirt to show his impressive battle scar to visitors to the Saratoga battleground. A bone medallion, now filed away in university archives, testifies to David Steele's eagerness to show off the piece of his skull that he lost at the Battle of Guilford Courthouse. A Civil War-era family portrait captures likenesses not only of family members but also of the shot that took off their father's arms. These are just a few of the sources that Thomas A. Chambers and Megan Kate Nelson use to reconsider the ways that nineteenth-century Americans gave meaning to the effects of war on the world around them. In some ways, their conclusions are familiar: they look to battlegrounds as sites of national identity formation, where Americans forged a sense of who they are by contemplating and shaping the landscape that they had torn apart in battle. Yet, as the aforementioned portraits suggest, the undercurrents of these books carry readers in an unexpected direction. A number of rich visual and written sources reveal the intimate, if sometimes understated, connections between bodies and landscapes in Chambers' and Nelson's works. War, both studies suggest, intermingled bodies and environments

in especially provocative ways.

As Thomas A. Chambers reveals in the opening pages of *Memories of War: Visiting Battlegrounds and Bonefields in the Early American Republic*, he embarked on his study because of his own long-standing love of visiting battlefields. In order to understand the historical development of this compelling relationship between place and memory, he “sought evidence of the kind of highly personal, vivid responses to battlefields” that he himself possessed (xi). After gathering evidence from a variety of battlefield archives, as well as more widely accessible print culture, he offers an interesting, though sometimes meandering, look at what he calls battleground tourism in the early republic. Chambers describes battlefields as overlooked, neglected, and forgotten in the aftermath of the Seven Years War, American Revolution, and War of 1812. Only in the 1820s, he argues, did Americans begin to view battlegrounds as edifying places that could evoke worthy memories of the past.

Chambers contends that this appreciation did not arise solely from the convergence of the fiftieth anniversary of the War for Independence, Lafayette’s Grand Tour of the United States, and the dying off of the Revolutionary generation, as many scholars of historical memory of the Revolution have asserted. Instead, he argues, American tourists appreciated battlegrounds in the 1820s primarily as picturesque landscapes. In the late eighteenth century, “accidental tourists” remembered colonial battles when they encountered bonefields in places such as Braddock’s Field and Ticonderoga (17). But it was not until the advent of the “Northern Tour” in upstate New York, Chambers argues, that travelers “created a new form of memory dependent on interaction with place, romantic scenery, and sentiment” (35). Individual responses to the landscape and popular guidebooks promoted historical memory of the Revolution and the War of 1812 according to principles of picturesque scenery rather than overt political or nationalistic agendas. Many battlegrounds in southern states offered visitors the same opportunities to appreciate picturesque landscapes but failed to attract visitors, Chambers asserts, because the South lacked a tourist infrastructure to accommodate travelers’ needs. Though Americans proposed commemorative monuments at a number of these battle sites in northern and southern states, Chambers argues that their reluctance to actually build these memorials reveals a continued ambivalence toward marking the past in place throughout the second quarter of the nineteenth century (66). Only in the 1850s, when sectional politics surpassed picturesque tourism as the impetus for visiting battlegrounds, did the “larger American public”—presumably individuals other than tourists—begin to commemorate battlefields (4).



Megan Kate Nelson, *Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012. 400 pp., \$69.95.

Chambers’ attention to the ways that Americans in the early republic viewed the landscape is a valuable intervention in a field that often relies on politics

to explain shifts in historical memory. By paying attention to the ways that Americans engaged transatlantic picturesque theory in new ways of traveling and looking at the landscape, he offers a new explanation about why transitions in historical memory and commemoration occurred. Still, the narrative that Chambers presents about the development of memory, place, and the American Revolution is a familiar one. Americans cared little for evidence of the past on the landscape before the 1820s. Even when they began to visit and study historic places in the second quarter of the century, few wanted to preserve or commemorate these sites with permanent memorials. The South lagged behind the North in developing both its historical consciousness and its landscape. Only in the 1850s, amid sectional crisis, did Americans turn to commemoration of historic sites as a popular, nationalist project. In all, Chambers seems to constrain his interpretations by sticking close to this narrative, set out by the very studies of historical memory that he seeks to reinterpret.

A fuller orientation toward landscape studies might have helped him to challenge the conventional narrative of early national historical memory altogether. After all, Chambers himself presents sources that seem to challenge his arguments about the primary importance of picturesque landscape over historical association. Chambers quotes Timothy Dwight, for example, pointing to two different ways of evaluating the landscape of northern New York during a trip in 1802. Dwight reported that he “had two principal objects in view. One was to examine the scenery of Lake George; the beauty of which had always been mentioned to me in strong terms of admiration: the other, to explore the grounds, on which the military events of former times had taken place, at its two extremities” (quoted on 43). In 1837, as Chambers points out, one U.S. senator emphasized history over landscape at Yorktown, Virginia, saying that “the mere lover of the picturesque” could find better landscapes to appreciate, but the battleground itself provided contemporary Americans with a direct link to the previous generation of men who had fought there (97). In this case, the original ground mattered, not picturesque scenic beauty. At one point, Chambers writes, “Most Southern battlefields lacked the physical landmarks that acted as narrative links and punctuation marks in people’s interpretation of the scene” (117). Yet throughout the same chapter he quotes many travelers saying that houses, sites, and features of the landscape linked them directly to past experiences, even though they did not find the landscape to be aesthetically pleasing. At the end of his study, Chambers is certainly right to point out that the desire for monuments grew in the 1850s, yet he also quotes travelers praising historic landscapes “unmarred by monuments” during that era (104).

Chambers might have resolved some of these seeming contradictions by exploring a question that resounded in my mind while reading the book: what exactly was a battleground in the early republic? At the beginning of his study, Chambers is careful to qualify the scope of his study by explaining that he “deliberately avoided extensive discussion of well-studied locations such as Bunker Hill or Lexington and Concord in favor of lesser known and, in some cases, more militarily significant battlefields in rural areas and especially in the South” (xiv). He later suggests that urban sites were atypical battlefields because

they did not elicit “the melancholy responses tourists experienced at barren battlefield sites often situated in magnificent landscapes” (4). Yet Chambers’ sources reveal that early Americans themselves did not necessarily draw a line between urban and rural sites or even northern and southern ones. Instead, they show early Americans appraising battle sites according to distinct elements of their landscapes: scenes, grounds, and monuments. Each evoked the past in a different way. How did travelers conjure the past from scenes as opposed to grounds? Did few Americans build monuments because they felt that grounds themselves conveyed enough information about the past? Chambers would have done well to explore the relationship between these various features and the ways that early Americans used them to create historical memories, much as Kirk Savage did in his book *Monument Wars* (2009). In this way, Chambers might have embarked on a deeper conversation about the influence of picturesque landscape theory, and its cousin association theory, to challenge the chronological and sectional truisms of the historical memory of the Revolution.

Megan Kate Nelson offers a different view of a common feature of picturesque landscapes: ruins. In *Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War*, Nelson expands readers’ view of the field of battle by considering the ways that Americans enacted and understood destruction of nature, the built environment, and people during the Civil War. In so doing, Nelson offers “the first book to consider the evocative power of wartime ruination as an imagined state, an act of destruction, and a process of change” (9). By participating in the act of ruination, Nelson argues, both northerners and southerners “created a new national narrative” grounded in the common experience of the destruction of the Union, not just its reconstruction.

Early Americans were long familiar with ruins as landscape features whose material fragmentation evoked an emotional response to the passage of time. But, as Nelson explains, Civil War ruins were something new—“sudden and shocking”—because Americans had inflicted this damage on themselves (2). Commanders burned cities to destroy the commercial centers of their enemies and leveled houses in the field to clear lines of sight. Soldiers broke into homes and rifled through personal belongings to invade and destroy the most intimate spaces of their enemies. Residents sometimes destroyed their own property as a defensive measure, not wanting the enemy to profit from looting or self-satisfaction. Armies mowed down forests and troops alike, in combat and in pursuit of resources. The ruins of living beings provoked a twinned awe and horror at the transformative power of new technologies. This destruction fragmented the American landscape into a constellation of shelled cities, ransacked houses, splintered trees, and amputated bodies that stood as evidence of the ways that “the violent technologies of war,” rather than incremental decay, natural disaster, or accidental catastrophe, had ushered the United States into a new era (2). Ruins were so evocative, in fact, that even as Americans cleared them from the landscape by demolition and reconstruction, they made ruins into portable relics that preserved not simply personal mementoes of experience but also material evidence of epochal change.



"Track of the Armies," etching No. 15 from Confederate War Etchings by Adalbert John Volck (1863). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Nelson's highly original, deeply researched book exemplifies how rethinking the meaning of the physical world itself can lead to new insights in a wide array of scholarly fields. By an astute pairing of quantitative analysis of property claims with a cultural and tactical explanation of their high numbers, she makes a convincing case that military historians have underestimated Civil War destruction. She also excels in defining ruination as a multi-faceted, yet coherent, martial strategy by showing how the multiple meanings of destruction depended on each other, as acts of geophysical and emotional assault, offensive and defensive strategy, and material and symbolic expressions of identity. Nelson also shows the value of reconstructing conversations that crossed the Mason-Dixon line. Rather than falling into a familiar discussion of how northerners and southerners differed, Nelson offers a more valuable assessment of the common ways in which Americans on both sides of the conflict thought about destruction. As a result, she is able to make compelling arguments about the ways that Americans used ruination to create different narratives during the Civil War. Even more interestingly, she successfully challenges the literature about historical memory that focuses on monument building and battlefield preservation as a source of national identity. Instead, she points to ruination itself as a process of building, and reconstructing, national identity in nineteenth-century America. Finally, in her chapter on bodies, Nelson provides a counterweight to studies of masculinity that emphasize the cultural construction of gender when she reminds readers that "actual bodies mattered" (175). Battle scars could garner respect for sacrifice and the authority of eyewitness. But dismemberment threatened the ability of 45,000 surviving amputees to earn a living, reproduce, and defend themselves. In an age when Americans rooted masculinity in self-determination, evidence of bravery in war could relegate evidence of masculinity to the past.



"Wounded Trees within Grant's Lines, North Side of Plank Road, opposite Cemetery No. 2, with Human Remains." Courtesy of the Stereocard Collection on the Civil War (Box 277, Stereocard # 61), American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Throughout the book, Nelson does an excellent job of explaining the very ambiguities that ruins posed to their observers rather than letting her own interpretations get mired in their multiple meanings. She explains how northerners celebrated the burning of Hampton, Virginia, for instance, as a defining act of modern war tactics while Confederate residents of the town celebrated their sacrifice of personal property to their national cause. The ambiguity of ruins could be risky as well as opportunistic. After the burning of Chambersburg, residents found themselves on the defensive when onlookers questioned their commitment to defending the Union. The ruins, residents

insisted, evinced their sacrifice for that very cause. Nelson skillfully shows how the same contestations for meaning occurred over broken bodies, forests, and houses. On one hand, Nelson says, "rubble was eloquent, speaking of the tremendous and sudden violence of war, of shells fired and exploding against walls, of fires started and spread by the wind" (60). On the other, ruins were ephemeral and highly ambiguous, so the explanatory power of their visual eloquence was limited. Images of and arguments about the destruction of many sites lasted much longer than physical reminders of those acts, and Nelson frequently points out that ruin narratives "were clearly much more powerful than the ruins themselves" (59).



"Burial of General Braddock," photographic reproduction of engraving after 1850s painting by John McNevin. Courtesy of the Historic U.S. Views Collection (Box 2, Folder 4), American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Nelson's skill at grappling with the various forms and meanings that ruins embodied during the Civil War, however, makes her own definition of ruins seem too rigid at times. She bookends her study with a definition of the ruin as "a material whole that has violently broken into parts; enough of these parts must remain in situ, however, that the observer can recognize what they used to be" (2). Ruination, then, was the process of change that created these sites. Were the singed chimneys evocative ruins even though they afforded no sense of Hampton, Virginia's, former city plan, as Nelson emphasizes, or of the size or function of the buildings they once heated? Were dead bodies and mangled limbs human ruins if warfare had "rendered [them] unidentifiable as individuals and often as humans" (169)? By tying her definition both to actual material condition *and* observers' assessments, Nelson undercuts her point that ruins were compelling features during the Civil War because few people defined or interpreted them the same way. Her definition also evades the issue of intent. Did it matter to nineteenth-century Americans whether ruins signified a defiance of their enemy's attempt to annihilate? An amputated arm often signified an escape from intended death; an intact chimney could stand as a surprising survival of an obliterating blaze. The physical characteristics of these ruins and their contexts connoted a destructive intent different from the mutilated photograph of one soldier, defaced by his enemies and then carefully replaced in the drawer of his widow's dressing table. In this case, the perpetrators engineered the maintenance of the recognizable whole to maximize the emotional devastation of enemy onlookers. Nelson is at her best when she sticks close to ruins themselves, showing her subjects grappling directly with their presence on the landscape. Steadier attention to these firsthand assessments might have helped her to show how Civil War participants turned to material evidence of ruins themselves to parse the intent of their perpetrators in their ruin narratives.

In both books, some of the most fascinating moments are the ones that highlight the connections that nineteenth-century Americans drew between bodies and landscapes. Megan Kate Nelson draws out these relationships explicitly in many

of her interpretations, using images and texts to link the invasion of homes with attacks on women's bodies and drawing parallels between the dismemberment of soldiers and trees. In contrast, Thomas Chambers devotes much less interpretative attention to bodies in his work, which is surprising given the intriguing term "bonefields" in his title. Yet many of his sources point to the ways that Americans in the early republic looked to the body as a register of individual experience in place, celebrated by the same Romantic principles that encouraged touristic appreciation of picturesque landscapes. Ezra Buel, who proudly showed his thoracic scar during tours of the Saratoga battlefield, and David Steele, who flashed his skull medallion to visitors at Guilford Courthouse, exemplify the ways that veterans used their bodies as badges of authority when defining the contested memory of a place. Dead bodies and burial sites took on a new meaning too, as Chambers points out in his too-brief discussion of memorial architecture at rural cemeteries in the 1830s.

Both authors leave readers to connect these moments, when the meanings of bodies and landscapes became inextricable. But once again, their sources suggest a way of spinning out the broader significance of these intriguing scenes. Nineteenth-century Americans most often made sense of the places where bodies and battles collided by using the language of the sacred. Chambers and Nelson often take this vocabulary for granted, relying uncritically on John Sears' *Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century* (1989), Pierre Nora's essay, "Between History and Memory: Les Lieux de Mémoire" (trans. 1989), and Edward Linenthal's *Sacred Ground: Americans and Their Battlefields* (1991) to do their interpretive work. However, in casting light on places where war collided bodies and earth, both authors have offered up new and important evidence for reconsidering the very meaning of sacred places themselves. By giving a new view of the relationship between bodies, battle sites, and the built environment, Thomas Chambers and Megan Kate Nelson have composed insightful studies of the landscape of war that also illuminate a new path for studies of the sacred in nineteenth-century America.

Further reading

Kirk Savage, *Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape* (Berkeley, Calif., 2009); Louis Nelson, ed., *American Sanctuary: Understanding Sacred Spaces* (Bloomington, Ind., 2006); Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883* (New Haven, Conn., 1999); Blanche Linden-Ward, *Silent City on a Hill: Picturesque Landscapes of Memory and Boston's Mount Auburn Cemetery*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 2007); Janet Moore Lindman and Michele Lise Tarter, eds., *A Centre of Wonders: The Body in Early America* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2001); Dell Upton, *Another City: Urban Life and Urban Spaces in the New American Republic* (New Haven, Conn., 2008).

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