

Historians and “Memory”



David W. Blight

For more than a decade, historians from many fields and nations have been studying the past through the lens of “memory.” Some say we have veered from our training and subject matter (“gone over to the enemy” of post-structuralism, as one questioner put it to me). But many others—and I include myself—have felt the pull to investigate how societies remember, to research the “myths” that define cultures, to cross over into the realm of public, collective historical consciousness in all its manifestations.

The concepts of history and memory can be conflated or discretely preserved in use and meaning; it is important to establish their differences. Historians are custodians of the past; we are preservers and discoverers of the facts and stories out of which people imagine their civic lives. But we need a sense of both humility and engagement in the face of *public* memory. “The remembered past,” warned John Lukacs in 1968, “is a much larger category than the recorded past.”

History is what trained historians do, a reasoned reconstruction of the past rooted in research; it tends to be critical and skeptical of human motive and

action, and therefore more secular than what people commonly call memory. History can be read by or belong to everyone; it is more relative, and contingent on place, chronology, and scale.

If history is shared and secular, memory is often treated as a sacred set of absolute meanings and stories, possessed as the heritage or identity of a community. Memory is often owned, history interpreted. Memory is passed down through generations; history is revised. Memory often coalesces in objects, sites, and monuments; history seeks to understand contexts in all their complexity. History asserts the authority of academic training and canons of evidence; memory carries the often more immediate authority of community membership and experience. Bernard Bailyn has aptly stated memory's appeal: "its relation to the past is an embrace . . . ultimately emotional, not intellectual."

Scholars working on memory are no less devoted to traditional sources than those on any other subject. We assess all manner of individual memories (actual remembered experience) in letters, memoirs, speeches, debates, and autobiography. But our primary concern is with the illusive problem of collective memory—the ways in which groups, peoples, or nations construct versions of the past and employ them for self-understanding and to win power in an ever-changing present. The fierce debate over National History Standards during the early 1990s was not only a clinic about the stakes in America's "culture wars," but a culture-wide lesson in the politics of history's relationship to collective memory.

In short, historians study memory because it has been such an important modern instrument of power. And what historians studying memory have come to understand is simply that the process by which societies or nations remember collectively itself has a history.

There are risks, of course, as historians shift their gaze to matters of social and public memory. We could become servants of the very culture wars that have given rise to so many struggles over memory in our own time. Memory is usually invoked in the name of nation, ethnicity, race, religion, or on behalf of a felt need for peoplehood or victimhood. It often thrives on grievance and its lifeblood is mythos and telos. Like our subjects, we can risk thinking *with* memory rather than *about* it. Indeed, the study of memory is fueled in part by the world's post-Holocaust and post-Cold War need to assess the stories of survivors of genocide, trauma, or totalitarian control over historical consciousness. While I agree that the world is riven with too much memory, and that its obsessions can stifle democratizing and universalizing principles, it is precisely because of this dilemma that we must study historical memory. We should know its uses and perils, its values and dark tendencies.

People will develop a sense of the past by one means or another—from schooling, religion, family, popular culture, or demagoguery. Historical consciousness can

result from indoctrination or a free market of a hundred blooming interpretations. But the greatest risk, writes Cynthia Ozick, is a tendency of people to derive their sense of the past only from the "fresh-hatched inspiration" of their "Delphic priests." History is often weak in the face of the mythic power of memory and its oracles. But we run the greatest risk in ignoring that weakness, wishing the public would adopt a more critical, interpretive sense of the past. "Cut off from the uses of history, experience, and memory," cautions Ozick, the "inspirations" alone of any culture's Delphic priests "are helpless to make a future." As historians, we are bound by our craft and by our humanity to study the problem of memory and thereby help make a future. We should respect the poets and priests; we should study the defining myths at play in any memory controversy. But then, standing at the confluence of the two streams of history and memory, we should write the history of memory, observing and explaining the turbulence we find.

The most turbulent problem in American historical memory has long been our Civil War. As I tried to show in my recent book, *Race and Reunion*, Americans have over the years drummed the deep divisiveness of 1861-65 into a national epic of unity, of mutual glory and sacrifice. But the politics of reconciliation came at tremendous costs in American race relations; they required a blurring and near erasure of the story of black emancipation at the heart of the war. During the first half century after Appomattox, and for most of the twentieth century as well, Americans preferred a story of reconciled conflict to the reality of unresolved racial and legal legacies.

The modern civil rights movement, occurring at the same time as the Civil War centennial, made new memories and narratives possible as never before. But any cursory look at the industry of Civil War publishing, nostalgia, and tourism will demonstrate that the story of the war as a sad but heroic episode on the journey to greater harmony and progress is alive and well in our popular memory. Widely divergent views of the war's meaning have surfaced in recent years over Confederate symbols and over the National Park Service's effort to broaden interpretations at battlefield sites. Moreover, the Sons of Confederate Veterans have become politicized as never before, portraying themselves and other advocates of Confederate tradition as victims of "cultural ethnic cleansing" and "wholesale persecution" by the "political correctness" of academic historians and their lackeys in government.

On the broadest level, most Americans love a good story of reunion, as evidenced in the popularity of Jay Winik's recent book, *April 1865: The Month that Saved America*. According to Winik, America was "saved" in one packed month of reconciliationist drama and spirit, from the fall of Richmond to the burial of Lincoln. A long view, at least glimpsing the beginning days of Reconstruction, seems to vast numbers of enthusiastic readers unnecessary in order to understand the place of the war in American memory.

How touching the healing can seem when viewed only from the poignancy of the war's immediate aftermath. What a rousing good story the Grant and Lee of April

1865 make us peacemakers rather than warmakers. Why take stock of lasting political and racial consequences of the war, or the bitterness of Reconstruction, or slavery's legacies when what we really need today is a good story of national harmony and American problem solving? American tragedies, after all, demand happy endings. Americans may not have remembered the Civil War quite like the Serbs did the battle of Kosovo from the fourteenth century. But our "great war" of the nineteenth century haunts our collective memory to this day. History and memory are both about the *stories* we tell, but those stories carry a rich politics born of the streets, of our classrooms, our elections, and the process by which books make it to the front tables at Barnes and Noble.

Collective memory should be seen as a set of practices and ideas embedded in a culture, which people learn to decode and convert into their identities. Jay Winter warns that "nations do not remember, groups of people do." Indeed, but nations are the evolving creations of high-stakes contests between groups contending to define the past, present, and future of national cultures. Is the United States the nation that preserved itself in the "War Between the States," or the republic that reinvented itself in a *civil war* that destroyed racial slavery and expanded freedom? Was the war a bloodletting on the way to a better, more unified nation ready to play its appointed role in world affairs? Or, was the war a deep national tragedy, the meaning of which is embedded in many conflicted group memories—those of defeated white Southerners, victorious white Northerners, black former slaves, the descendants of free blacks, or European immigrant groups who made up significant percentages of the Union armies?

Indeed, who *owns* the memory of the Civil War? Is it those who wish to preserve the sacred ground of battlefield parks for the telling of an epic narrative of shared military glory? Or, is it professional historians with academic training, determined to broaden the public interpretation of Civil War sites to include slavery, social history, women, and home fronts? Should the master narrative of the Civil War be an essentially reconciliationist story of mutual sacrifice by noble men and women who believed in their equal versions of the right? Or, should that narrative be a complex, pluralistic story of sections and races deeply divided over the future of slavery, free labor, and the character and breadth of American liberty? If everyone fought for "liberty" in the Civil War, as is often said, then whose collective memory of the struggle should have a privileged place in textbooks, films, and on our memorial landscape? Indeed, whose claims to liberty prevailed?

Just by asking these questions we can see how contested Civil War memory can be. The war is not an event we have transformed entirely into the realm of pleasing myth, although it remains very difficult to penetrate its veneer of sentimentalism in the popular mind. Like all other modern nations, America's historical memory can never be fixed in a static structure or a single master narrative. Our multicultural national identity will continue to evolve, and new history wars will break out among historians and school boards. Politicians

will continue to claim a useable past for their ends, as will a hundred local Delphic priests. But nations still have histories colliding and forming in tandem and conflict with many group memories. As historians we have to keep contending to define the whole formed from all of our parts.

Further Reading: See Bernard Bailyn, "Considering the Slave trade: History and Memory," *William and Mary Quarterly*, LVIII (January 2001); David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001); David Goldfield, *Still Fighting the Civil War: The American South and Southern History* (Baton Rouge, La., 2002); Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York, 1991); John Lukacs, *Historical Consciousness or the Remembered Past* (reprint New York, 1985); Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York, 2000); Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire, *Representations*, 26 (Spring 1989): 7-25; Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston, 1999); Cynthia Ozick, "Metaphor and Memory," in Ozick, *Metaphor and Memory: Essays* (New York, 1991), 265-83; "Position Statement: National Park Service Interpretive Programs," Sons of Confederate Veterans' Department of Heritage Defense, January 19, 2001, copy provided by Dwight Pitcaithly, Chief Historian, National Park Service; Robert Penn Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War: Meditations on the Centennial* (New York, 1961); Jay Winik, *April 1865: The Month that Saved America* (New York, 2001); Jay Winter, "Film and the Matrix of Memory," *American Historical Review*, 106 (June 2001): 857-64.

This article originally appeared in issue 2.3 (April, 2002).

Common-place asks David W. Blight, Class of 1959 Professor of history and black studies at Amherst College, and the author most recently of *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001) about the differences between remembering and analyzing the past.