

Book review on gaines m foster ghosts of the confederacy oxford

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Gaines M. Foster, ‘ Ghosts of the Confederacy,’ Oxford University Press, 1987

On May 6, 1895, a 70-foot-high monument memorializing Confederate dead was dedicated before an enthusiastic crowd featuring local dignitaries and leaders of Confederate organizations. The statue was part of a wave of commemorations honoring martyrs to the Lost Cause, ceremonies that were commonplace throughout the South for nearly a half-century after Lee's surrender at Appomattox. This ceremony, however, took place in Louisville, Kentucky, the largest city in a state that never seceded from the union and which housed thousands of federal troops throughout the war. It is a measure of the power of the Lost Cause that 30 years after the war ended it could elicit an outpouring of emotion and nostalgia in a city that has, at best, only a vaguely southern identity. Gaines M. Foster's *Ghosts of the Confederacy* speaks to the longevity, and the enduring political influence, of this singular socio-cultural phenomenon. The post-war South that Foster describes created its own pantheon and revised history as few nations have ever done.

Honor was an ideal that informed southern attitudes toward the Confederacy's defeat. Foster describes a kind of mass neurosis which virtually required that an alternate view of the war's causes and the reasons for its outcome be manufactured. As such, southerners and the organizations that kept alive the chivalrous vision of the Lost Cause invented palatable explanations, such as the "overwhelming numbers" theory, for the

Confederacy's demise. " Extrapolating an image of success from the overwhelming-numbers explanation, (Confederate

veterans) hardly realized they had lost on the field of battle." 1 While Foster notes that most probably did not believe this in a literal sense, it did reflect a belief in their own martial efficacy and mitigated the psychological and emotional cost of their defeat. 2

That defeat raised the curtain on a social epoch marked by Reconstruction, commercialism and emancipation. One would be hard-pressed to cite any defeated nation in modern history, with perhaps the exception of post-World War II Germany, that has been subjected to more profoundly transformative social change than the states that made up the Confederacy. Perhaps the closest parallel to the Confederacy's post-war apologia was Germany after World War I, a conflict that most Germans claimed was not lost on the battlefield but by political treachery at home. Seething resentment in the South could not produce a return to arms, as occurred in Germany. But it did provide the means whereby southerners could reorder events in response to alienation and occupation.

The South's entire social order was disintegrating into chaos. Foster contends that by creating a new rationale for the war southerners could take the moral " high ground" despite having fought to maintain the institution of slavery. Ultimately, social order and stability were needed most. " Portraying the war as a defense of constitutional rights and the soldiers as disciplined and respectful of private property helped bolster social stability." 3 The

construction of the romanticized Lost Cause preserved the southerner's cherished honor, but it also helped restore a badly needed sense of social order. Holding on to their values, in a sense, amounted to a vindication of their struggles and sufferings. Thus, Foster makes a telling statement about what southern honor and valor came to mean after the war. " The Confederate tradition by the 1890s served the cause of order, not of rebellious covert means of social control." 4

Foster argues that southern reaction to the Lost Cause has been misunderstood and misinterpreted in the century since it reached its apex. Whereas many historians have regarded the romance of the Lost Cause as symptomatic of a persistent and widespread sectional hatred, Foster counters that it actually helped the South negotiate the difficulties of rejoining the union. " A minority of white southerners would continue to share their hatred and intransigence, but by the mid-eighties the majority had come to terms with defeat and embraced a future within the Union." 5 The glorification of Confederate heroes and victories after the war eased the passage of the former Confederate states back into the union, particularly in an uncertain environment in which there was substantial uncertainty as to the circumstances under which that reunion would play out.

Robert E. Lee himself had called on his soldiers and, by implication, southerners in general to accept the restoration of the union and to embrace becoming Americans once again. Lee and several of his fellow Confederate leaders had endorsed this position in a statement issued during the 1868 presidential campaign, and their former enemies seemed to concur that their

statement and other attempts to solidify the restoration of the union had met with success. In general, northerners agreed that “the majority of Confederates accepted defeat, abandoned secession, and acquiesced in the abolition of slavery.”⁶ Southerners had proven extremely willing to follow their revered leaders on the battlefield and that loyalty, for the most part, remained in place after the war.

Nevertheless, acceptance of the inevitable came grudgingly, and it was assured that certain conditions in the post-war South, such as tolerance for black equality, would not be embraced. And, Foster reminds us, southern leaders continued to position themselves to retain as much power as possible, which many suspicious northerners mistakenly saw as evidence of renewed hostility. “To interpret their posture solely as continued defiance underrates the importance of the concession southerners did make: abandonment of their vision of an independent nation of slaveholders.”⁷ Foster argues that this overly simplistic perspective distorts the realities of Reconstruction, which did not proceed along neatly defined lines of North and South, abolitionist and former slaveholder.⁸ Once federal troops had withdrawn from the former Confederacy, the situation returned to one of power politics, which had been the case before hostilities began in 1861.

The end of the war and the onset of a shifting political landscape infused the situation with a certain ambiguity. Foster points out that if it is true that black equality was never a northern war aim, then the South “could not have been expected to interpret defeat as a mandate for racial progress.”⁹ In that light, Foster reasons, southern resistance to black enfranchisement

should, in all fairness, not be considered intransigence. Southerners then cannot, in fairness, be excoriated for attempting to make the best of a bad situation. As newly re-minted Americans, they sought to manipulate the political environment of the day to the best of their ability. That they did so in order to minimize the impact of abolition and black social integration does not, of course, redound to their credit. But the situation that Foster describes was a political one, and it cannot be denied that certain misgivings and prejudices concerning the status of former slaves were shared on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line.

The new social reality in the South caused southerners to band together as activists much as they had done as soldiers during four years of civil war. These new organizations took the form of memorial and patriotic groups that took it upon themselves to keep alive the South's chivalric ideal. The formation of pro-southern groups ranged from the notorious (the Ku Klux Klan) to the charitable (Confederate veterans associations). Dozens of new organizations sprouted into being as espousal of the Lost Cause spread throughout the region. Groups such as the Southern Historical Society and the United Daughters of the Confederacy played increasingly important roles throughout the late-19th and early-20th centuries, working to generate an image of a cause and a society now lost; to provide material aid to Confederate veterans; and political support for southern politicians.

Foster shows that many of these groups were instrumental in formulating the Lost Cause image that became so consequential throughout the South and, eventually, the nation. " These groups sponsored much of the writing and

oration that helped shape southern perceptions of defeat.” 10 It must be considered a testament to the influence of these groups that their historic commemorations and ritual ceremonies proved so consequential and lasting. And, of course, they have been considered quite valuable as providers of education concerning the Confederate past, even if that past was somewhat skewed. This “ historical work” was so pervasive that the UDC, SCV and others came to be regarded as the primary means through which many southerners came to know and understand their heritage. 11

Preserving that heritage had become more problematic by 1880, when an increasingly industrialized South took hold and began to transform the old slave-holding society into a more modern, commercialized representation. Foster describes a kind of disambiguation exacerbated by the rapid change of a set-piece economy and way of life that had existed for hundreds of years. New voices, such as Henry Watterson, insisted that not only had the Old South, an “ indolent, violent and generally unpleasant place,” been defeated in war, but that the wheels of economic progress and social evolution had rendered it anachronistic and obsolete. 12 But traditionalists like Charles C. Jones and ex-Confederate general John B. Gordon, bolstered by the rise of Confederate memorial organizations, were able to ride the wave of Confederate nostalgia and keep alive the ethos for which they had fought.

This dichotomy expressed a sharp social divide over the region’s self-image and utterly incompatible visions of its future. “ The beginnings of industrialization and integration into a national system threatened traditional

patterns of life” 13 For the Old South stalwarts, modernization meant nothing less than a refutation of the nobility of the Lost Cause and an acceptance of northern values. It meant, in effect, surrendering all over again to their old enemy, only this time the defeat was far more insidious. The rise of great, industrialized cities like Atlanta and Birmingham pointed to an inexorable process of industrialization that was accompanied by other alien developments, such as “ the emergence of a town culture, and increased integration into a national society.” 14 The cultural war of rhetoric that was waged between Old and New South proponents, though divisive and virulent, helped the post-war South resolve old issues and learn to accept the change that would alter the region forever.

Industrialization aside, the prospect of a new prosperity for southerners eventually won the day. More or less equal access to wealth had been an impossibility in the Old South, where the relatively small slaveholding population held economic power over the less affluent majority, which had been relegated to generations of virtual feudalism. As the new economic model took hold and began to pay dividends, even the staunchest of the old guard, many of them former slaveholders and Confederate veterans, began to voice a new perspective that sought to accommodate the old and the new. “ Although welcoming prosperity, railroads, and commerce, (Charles) explained ‘ in the midst of such material growth, I would covet a remembrance and an observance” of the patriotism, purity and manhood that the brave legions in gray had fought to uphold. 15

In many ways, the American Civil War was a conflict over modernization. The evolutionary forces of economic and social progress brought the agrarian, traditionalist South into direct conflict with the industrialist North. The rapid and radical change that came in the wake of military defeat required that a society founded on slavery find ways to ease the transition. Central to this endeavor was the invention of the Lost Cause and the rationalizations for the Confederacy's defeat that helped reconcile the old with the new. Foster explains that the South was finally able to accept such foundational change by transforming and burnishing the cause for which the Confederacy fought and the heroism of its political leaders, generals and soldiers.

References

Foster, Gaines M. *Ghosts of the Confederacy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.