



Civil War Monuments and the Militarization of America by Thomas J. Brown.

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Review by Matthew E. Stanley, Albany State University (matthew.stanley@asurams.edu).

Monument wars are not unique to our own political moment. Bitter contests over what representations should stand on the public landscape are a deeply American tradition—and a seemingly human one as well. Nor are monuments some kind of apolitical “word of God” whose removal has the potential to “erase” history. Rather, they are political manifestations of discrete ideas, attitudes, and policies, as well as class, racial, regional, and gender preferences. Put another way, monuments are bronze and stone renderings of the past that, by conscious design or not, influence the present, and whose meanings succeeding generations continuously debate and reconfigure.

In his new book, Thomas Brown examines dozens of monuments to reveal the mutable and contingent political dynamics of collective memory. He discusses the varied uses and interpretations of Civil War monuments with regard to artistic intentions, public negotiations, ceremonial practices, commissioning procedures, fundraising strategies, and the influence of power brokers. He also tells us something about the links between monuments and society that bears on present-day reappraisals.

Based on his control of pertinent primary sources, the author discriminates three types of monuments: (a) memorials/statues of ordinary citizens constructed during the Civil War; (b) representations of public leaders; and (c) victory monuments. Of these, class “a” departed most from existing precedents, while “b” and “c” hewed more to tradition. Over time, despite the occasional protests of reformers, intellectuals, and political progressives, all three genres came to reflect a violent, gendered, and highly stratified social order.

Americans did not always live in a monumental society. As Kirk Savage¹ and other scholars have noted, citizens in the early national period deeply distrusted monuments. Steeped in the anti-Federalist and Jeffersonian aversion to standing armies, they associated monumental works with monarchy, making them incompatible with democratic values. The Civil War changed that. Brown suggests that, by the middle of the war, Americans needed public coping mechanisms, and common-soldier monuments bridged the gap between prewar dislike of monuments and the postwar need to commemorate the hundreds of thousands of war dead. Gravestones, cenotaphs, obelisks, memorial halls, allegorical figures, and likenesses of citizen-soldiers soon linked citizenship to military service and the soldier replaced the farmer as the emblematic American male. Often conveying mourning, meditation, and sentimentality, these monuments identified military service with local and regional forms of democracy, ethnicity, and both middle and working-class life.

But memorials and small statues were just the tip of the iceberg. Propelled by swelling veterans’ organizations like the Grand Army of the Republic and the United Confederate Veterans, ide-

1. In *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Univ Pr, 2018).

alizations of soldiers during the monument boom of 1900–1915 pivoted from their concentration on war dead. They tied monuments directly to the needs and attitudes of living veterans—and eventually to the state. Single-figure and group statues of troops in action stoked such nationalist gestures as drives to make the Pledge of Allegiance and American flags mandatory in public schools. Others works animated white supremacy, idealized conservative womanhood, or symbolized state power against workers. In short, Civil War veterans, by helping popularize representations of themselves, became unofficial arbiters of American patriotism.

At the same time, a proliferation of commander statues idealized hierarchical leadership and evoked social deference. Unlike the iconoclastic republicanism of the Revolutionary generation that venerated artisans and small farmers, equestrian statues of military and civilian leaders drew on precedents from imperial Rome through monarchical Europe. Depending on who controlled the war narrative, certain leaders were emphasized and others ignored. Massive budgets mirrored the expansion of military bureaucracy: a professionalized National Guard, a rapidly expanding navy, and the creation of a general staff. Although regional (West vs. East) and sectional (North vs. South) stylings persisted, most statues fostered conciliatory militarism. Rather than depicting sectional reunion, statues led white elites North and South to embrace a homogeneous martial culture. Enormous ornate soldier and battle monuments called to mind a nation-state based on the racial and labor order of Jim Crow and corporate capitalism.

Even more than common soldier and (mounted) commander statues, “victory” monuments flouted the anti-triumphalist commemorative preferences of the post-Revolutionary republic. Borrowing directly from Old World analogues, arches, columns, and allegorical figures were openly hierarchical, self-aggrandizing, and often celebratory of violence. Rather than promoting reconciliation, most embodied sectional themes. In the South, this meant honoring political Redemption and the Anglo-Saxon triumph over the “negro rule” of Reconstruction. In the North such hyper-sectionalism meant consecrating what Robert Penn Warren dubbed the “Treasury of Virtue” or what John R. Neff called the “Cause Victorious.” Across Northern cities, images of Columbia, “Armed Freedom,” and winged Victory expressed support for expansionistic projects, first across the North American continent and then abroad into Latin America and the Pacific. In fact, Brown maintains that Civil War monuments contributed to a full-on redefinition of the state. By 1900, most Americans believed militarism to be integral to national identity rather than a threat to democracy.

Brown asserts that, because the US entry into World War I immediately followed the peak decade of Civil War monument building (1905–15), those memorials shaped popular understanding of the conflict in Europe. The prewar proliferation of Lincoln memorials accounted for his prominence in Great War imagery and the publicity of mobilization. Moreover, American commemoration differed sharply from that of the other Allies, especially the French, whose *monuments aux morts* (monuments to the dead) evinced their nation’s colossal human losses.

Rather than tributes specifically to those who had perished in 1914–18, US statuary normally centered on *all* soldiers, living and dead, thus reflecting Civil War patterns. The meaning of the Great War was superimposed on existing Civil War monuments and grafted onto new ones. The rationale of a “war to end all wars” is that cultural militarism can foster peace in some Orwellian sense.

Some readers, especially those with backgrounds in art and art history, may find Brown’s use of certain terms to be a source of confusion. For instance, he never explicitly distinguishes between *monuments*, which tend to convey grand and triumphal themes, and *memorials*, which connote grief, bereavement, and solemnity. A clearer definition of a handful of key terms would

have strengthened his work. More generally, Brown's thesis regarding militarization, though important and compelling, is more asserted than proved. He insists that "cultural form invigorated ideology in the metamorphosis of the country from iconoclastic republic to a militarized nation." The shift toward monumentalism "not only correlated with but preceded and facilitated policy developments" (2). The Civil War certainly elevated the prestige of the military in American life. More specifically, the lessons and implications of Civil War monuments eased bourgeois anxieties over immigration, national expansion, industrial capitalism, and other forms of social and political fragmentation. Brown even suggests that, by their stress on discipline, individualism, and the values prized by patricians and "captains of industry," Civil War monuments were instruments of social control over working-class people.

Yet readers are left to ponder whether monument culture was the source or the result of wider policy and social change. Of course, any given society's monuments naturally reflect, reinforce, and sometimes even anticipate ideological trends. But this does not illuminate the more specific links between Civil War monuments and "militarization," much less US foreign or domestic policy. One wishes Brown had more sharply defined the connections among, say, westward expansion, eugenics, segregation, imperialism, Social Darwinism, White Man's Burden, or capitalist ideology vis-à-vis consumerism. Work remains to be done on the political and economic genealogy of Civil War monuments.

Civil War Monuments and the Militarization of America is chock-full of fascinating insights into the dynamism and variety of Civil War memory, especially *Union* memory, which remains understudied compared to the Lost Cause of the Confederacy. Scholars of the Civil War, US cultural history, and collective memory should read with care the arguments Thomas Brown makes in his wonderful and timely new book.