



Ends of Wars: The Unfinished Fight of Lee's Army after Appomattox

by Caroline E. Janney.

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Robert E. Lee's surrender to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House is one of American history's most storied episodes. For some 150 years, historians, lyricists, painters, poets, and filmmakers have been enthralled by the generals' negotiations. Appomattox has long been seen as the culmination of a great fratricidal conflict. Historian Caroline Janney (Univ. of Virginia) shows in her acclaimed book,¹ *Ends of War*, that Lee's capitulation marked the continuation of a second story, and a beginning of yet a third.

Civil War historians have long been fascinated by the transitional period between war and peace. Relevant for Janney are works by Dan Carter, Stephen Ash, and Gregory Downs,² among other foundational studies. She also expands on her own earlier work on Civil War memory and the origins of the Lost Cause.³

While Lee's capitulation clearly ended the Confederacy, Janney maintains that "if we slow down the pace, taking the story frame by frame, looking at events as they unfolded day by day *after* Appomattox, we see a far more contentious, uncertain, ambiguous, and lengthy ending to the Civil War" (3). A cacophony of questions plagued Lee's veterans: was the war truly over? how would they get home? would the Union victors treat them as traitors? How, if at all, would their wartime sacrifices be remembered, what would remain of the Old South's racial hierarchy?

For legions of "Johnny Rebs," stacking rifles at Appomattox did not mark a clear end to their soldiering experience. Unit cohesion survived the army's capitulation as most of Lee's men made their way home as companies and regiments with an intact command structure. Surrender did little to weaken their faith in their own martial superiority and their cause's righteousness. Many thought surrender would be fleeting and they would soon take up arms again. Moreover, some twenty thousand of Lee's soldiers, a blend of stragglers, deserters, and diehards, were not present for the surrender.

As Janney shows, the road home from Appomattox was fraught with danger and uncertainty. Food was the most immediate concern: Lee's men found themselves at the mercy of white southern civilians who, based on their own convictions and station, greeted needy soldiers with a generosity that could be gracious, begrudging, or nonexistent. Transportation, too, was a vital concern, as Union railcars became welcome sights for footsore Confederate soldiers.

1. Winner of the 2022 Gilder Lehrman Lincoln Prize.

2. Respectively, *When the War Was Over: The Failure of Self-Reconstruction in the South, 1865-1867* (Baton Rouge: LSU Pr, 1985), *A Year in the South: Four Lives in 1865* (NY: Palgrave, 2002), and *After Appomattox: Military Occupation and the Ends of War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Pr, 2015).

3. *Burying the Dead but Not the Past: Ladies' Memorial Associations and the Lost Cause* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2008) and *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconstruction* (id., 2013).

Inverted aspects of the Old South's racial hierarchy were common after the surrender. Mostly unarmed groups of Confederate veterans feared they would fall victim to vengeful patrols of black Union soldiers; at least one group of homeward bound Rebels found themselves temporarily quartered in Fairfax, Virginia's slave jail. "The presence of Black men in uniforms," Janney asserts, "more than the surrender itself, represented the death of the Confederacy and a new racial order" (178). The Civil War's racially motivated violence and reprisals persisted throughout the diaspora from Appomattox.

While the author concentrates on Confederate soldiers' experiences, she also provides a probing analysis of the Union victors' role in the aftermath of surrender. Grant exercised strong leadership and his decisions mingled benevolence and practicality.

Generosity flowed naturally from a winning commander whose principal goal, as it was for most of the loyal citizenry, was ending the fighting and restoring the Union. But it was more than generosity that motivated Grant's decision. Paroled soldiers would be accounted for, included on lists kept by Union authorities. To parole them was to have a record of them. Perhaps more importantly, soldiers who broke their paroles might be executed. Paroling Lee's men might deter them from continuing the rebellion by other means. (34)

While the surrender at Appomattox ended the war, it also spawned the soon-to-be-prolific Myth of the Lost Cause. Upon surrender, Lee assured his men they had yielded only to the enemy's overwhelming numerical superiority. His army—he insisted, and his men believed—had not been truly militarily defeated.

This mixture of frustration, failure, and disbelief would not be left on the field. It would not be supplanted by memories of a peaceful reconciliation born in the McLean parlor. Instead, these emotions would seed a strident defense of Lee, his army, and the Confederate cause for decades to come. (56)

Ends of War merges multiple historiographies. Hence, military and social historians, as well as scholars of memory will find much of value in its pages. And, thanks to Caroline Janney's lucid and compelling narrative, her book will appeal strongly to general readers as well.