

RACE AND REUNION

THE CIVIL WAR IN
AMERICAN MEMORY

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Prologue

History . . . does not refer merely to the past . . .
history is literally *present* in all that we do.

—JAMES BALDWIN, “Unnameable Objects, Unspeakable Crimes,” 1965

“THE CIVIL WAR is our *felt* history—history lived in the national imagination,” wrote Robert Penn Warren in his *Legacy of the Civil War* (1961). “Somewhere in their bones,” he declared, “most Americans have a storehouse of “lessons” drawn from the Civil War. Exactly what those lessons should be, and who should determine them, has been the most contested question in American historical memory since 1863, when Robert E. Lee retreated back into Virginia, Abraham Lincoln went to Gettysburg to explain the meaning of the war, and Frederick Douglass announced “national regeneration” as the “sacred significance” of the war. Among those lessons, wrote Warren, is the realization that “slavery looms up mountainously” in the story, “and cannot be talked away.” But Warren acknowledged another lesson of equal importance for Americans of all persuasions: “When one is happy in forgetfulness, facts get forgotten.” Or as William Dean Howells once put it: “What the American public always wants is a tragedy with a happy ending.”¹

This book is a history of how Americans remembered their most divisive and tragic experience during the fifty-year period after the Civil War. It probes the interrelationship between the two broad themes of race and reunion in American culture and society from the turning point in the war (1863) to the culmination of its semicentennial in 1915. This is necessarily, therefore, a synthetic and selective work on a vast topic. I am primarily concerned with the ways that contending memories clashed or intermingled in public memory, and not in a developing professional historiography of the

Civil War. All historians make research decisions and impose categories on the infinity of evidence and on the enormous variety of human stories embedded in their subjects. This book is no exception: Reconstruction politics, reunion literature, soldiers' memory, the reminiscence industry, African American memory, the origins and uses of Memorial Day, and the Southern Lost Cause receive considerable attention in this work, while other important forms and voices of memory do not, such as monument-building, late-nineteenth-century presidential politics, business enterprise, or the gendered character of America's romance with reunion. I have ignored none of these themes, but in every chapter have kept my eye on race as the central problem in how Americans made choices to remember and forget their Civil War. Throughout, I tell the stories of Civil War memory with the divergent voices of North and South, black and white, joined in the same narrative. And in every chapter I have tried to tell stories by using the power and variety of American voices: presidents and generals, men and women, former foot soldiers and ex-slaves, master novelists and essayists as well as the thousands who crafted ordinary reminiscences, romantics and realists, the victors and the vanquished.

Three overall visions of Civil War memory collided and combined over time: one, the reconciliationist vision, which took root in the process of dealing with the dead from so many battlefields, prisons, and hospitals and developed in many ways earlier than the history of Reconstruction has allowed us to believe; two, the white supremacist vision, which took many forms early, including terror and violence, locked arms with reconciliationists of many kinds, and by the turn of the century delivered the country a segregated memory of its Civil War on Southern terms; and three, the emancipationist vision, embodied in African Americans' complex remembrance of their own freedom, in the politics of radical Reconstruction, and in conceptions of the war as the reinvention of the republic and the liberation of blacks to citizenship and Constitutional equality. In the end this is a story of how the forces of reconciliation overwhelmed the emancipationist vision in the national culture, how the inexorable drive for reunion both used and trumped race. But the story does not merely dead-end in the bleakness of the age of segregation; so much of the emancipationist vision persisted in American culture during the early twentieth century, upheld by blacks and a fledgling neo-abolitionist tradition, that it never died a permanent death on the landscape of Civil War memory. That persistence made the revival of the emancipationist memory

of the war and the transformation of American society possible in the last third of the twentieth century.

Americans faced an overwhelming task after the Civil War and emancipation: how to understand the tangled relationship between two profound ideas—*healing* and *justice*. On some level, both had to occur; but given the potency of racial assumptions and power in nineteenth-century America, these two aims never developed in historical balance. One might conclude that this imbalance between outcomes of sectional healing and racial justice was simply America's inevitable historical condition, and celebrate the remarkable swiftness of the reunion, as Paul Buck did in his influential book, *The Road to Reunion* (1937).² But theories of inevitability—of irrepressible conflicts or irrepressible reconciliations—are rarely satisfying. Human reconciliations—when tragically divided people unify again around aspirations, ideas, and the positive bonds of nationalism—are to be cherished. But sometimes reconciliations have terrible costs, both intentional and unseen. The sectional reunion after so horrible a civil war was a political triumph by the late nineteenth century, but it could not have been achieved without the resubjugation of many of those people whom the war had freed from centuries of bondage. This is the tragedy lingering on the margins and infesting the heart of American history from Appomattox to World War I.

For many whites, especially veterans and their family members, healing from the war was simply not the same proposition as doing justice to the four million emancipated slaves and their descendants. On the other hand, a simple justice, a fair chance to exercise their basic rights, and secure access to land and livelihood were all most blacks ever demanded of Reconstruction and beyond. They sought no official apologies for slavery, only protection, education, human recognition, a helping hand. The rub, of course, was that there were many warring definitions of healing in the South and the nation's collective memory had never been so shattered. In the wake of the Civil War, there were no "Truth and Reconciliation" commissions through which to process memories of either slavery or the experience of total war. Defeated white Southerners and black former slaves faced each other on the ground, seeing and knowing the awful chasm between their experiences, unaware that any path would lead to *their* reconciliation. Yankee and Confederate soldiers, however, would eventually find a smoother path to bonds of fraternalism and mutual glory. As is always the case in any society trying to master the most conflicted elements of its past, healing and justice had to happen *in history*

and *through politics*. Reinhold Niebuhr wrote with insight about this historical dilemma that has so plagued modern nations. "The processes of historical justice," said Niebuhr, "are . . . not exact enough to warrant the simple confidence in the moral character of history . . . Moral judgments are executed in history, but never with precision . . . every execution of moral judgments in history is inexact because of its necessary relation to the morally irrelevant fact of power."³ Americans have had to work through the meaning of their Civil War in its rightful place—in the politics of memory. And as long as we have a politics of race in America, we will have a politics of Civil War memory.

In many ways, this is a story of how in American culture romance triumphed over reality, sentimental remembrance won over ideological memory. For Americans broadly, the Civil War has been a defining event upon which we have often imposed unity and continuity; as a culture, we have often preferred its music and pathos to its enduring challenges, the theme of reconciled conflict to resurgent, unresolved legacies. The greatest enthusiasts for Civil War history and memory often displace complicated consequences by endlessly focusing on the contest itself. We sometimes lift ourselves out of historical time, above the details, and render the war safe in a kind of national Passover offering as we view a photograph of the Blue and Gray veterans shaking hands across the stone walls at Gettysburg. Deeply embedded in an American mythology of mission, and serving as a mother lode of nostalgia for antimodernists and military history buffs, the Civil War remains very difficult to shuck from its shell of sentimentalism. Over time, Americans have needed deflections from the deeper meanings of the Civil War. It haunts us still; we feel it, to borrow from Warren, but often do not face it.

In the half century after the war, as the sections reconciled, by and large, the races divided. The intersectional wedding that became such a staple of mainstream popular culture, especially in the plantation school of literature, had no interracial counterpart in the popular imagination. Quite the opposite: race was so deeply at the root of the war's causes and consequences, and so powerful a source of division in American social psychology, that it served as the antithesis of a culture of reconciliation. The memory of slavery, emancipation, and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments never fit well into a developing narrative in which the Old and New South were romanticized and welcomed back to a new nationalism, and in which devotion alone made everyone right, and no one truly wrong, in the remembered Civil War. Persistent discussion of the "race problem" across the political and ideological

spectrum throughout the late nineteenth century meant that American society could not easily remember its "Civil War problem" or a "Blue-Gray problem."

In a popular novel, *Cease Firing* (1912), Southern writer Mary Johnston, a Virginian imbued with Lost Cause tradition and a determination to represent its complexity (as well as a progressive woman and a suffragist), imagined a telling dialogue that may have captured the memory that most Americans, then and even now, want to embrace about the Civil War. On the last page of the book, Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia is retreating west toward its final collapse and surrender at Appomattox in the last week of the war. The April breezes are not yet warm, and the rivers to be forded still run cold. One Confederate soldier asks another what he thinks it all means. "I think that we were both right and both wrong," says the veteran of many battles, "and that, in the beginning, each side might have been more patient and much wiser. Life and history, and right and wrong and minds of men look out of more windows than we used to think! Did you never hear of the shield that had two sides and both were precious metal?" There was, of course, no lack of honor on either side in that fateful and compassionate surrender at Appomattox in 1865. And Johnston captured an honest soldiers' sentiment that had reverberated through veterans' memory for decades. But outside of this pathos and the endearing mutuality of sacrifice among soldiers that came to dominate national memory, another process was at work—the denigration of black dignity and the attempted erasure of emancipation from the national narrative of what the war had been about. That other process led black scholar and editor W. E. B. Du Bois to conclude in the same year as Johnston's novel that "this country has had its appetite for facts on the Negro problem spoiled by sweets."⁴ Deflections and evasions, careful remembering and necessary forgetting, and embittered and irreconcilable versions of experience are all the stuff of historical memory.

If Du Bois was at all correct in his famous 1903 assertion that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line," then we can begin to see how the problems of "race" and "reunion" were trapped in a tragic, mutual dependence.⁵ This book is the story of that dependence, and its consequences, in America's collective memory.

Prologue

1. Robert Penn Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War* (1961; rpt. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 4, 7, 60; William Dean Howells, quoted in Allan Gurganus, *Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All* (New York: Ivy Books, 1984), epigraph.
2. Paul H. Buck, *The Road to Reunion, 1865-1900* (New York: Knopf, 1937). Buck's book won the Pulitzer Prize for history in 1938. It was a pioneering achievement in the use of innovative sources to write cultural history. Buck also essentially ignored racial questions, or considered them historically insoluble—an outlook that garnered considerable popularity in the 1930s.
3. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History* (New York: Scribner's, 1949), 129.
4. Mary Johnston, *Cease Firing* (1912; rpt. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 457; W. E. B. Du Bois, editorial in *Crisis* (April 1912). *Cease Firing* followed *The Long Roll* as Johnston's two-volume epic fiction of the Southern armies in the whole of the Civil War. She was one of the best writers in her time of combat scenes, as well as of the epic romance of the Confederate cause.
5. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; rpt. Boston: Bedford Books, 1997), 45.