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Sing Not War

The Lives of Union and Confederate Veterans in Gilded Age America

By James Marten

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. Pp. xii, 339. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95.)

James Marten's new book is not the comprehensive account of the postwar lives of Union and Confederate veterans that he had hoped to write. As Marten acknowledges in the introduction, such an undertaking soon proved too massive. Instead, he focuses his study mainly, but not exclusively, on Union veterans whose transition into civilian life was problematic or who failed to fit into the rapidly changing industrial and urban society of late nineteenth-century America. Offsetting this narrowing of scope, Marten carries his study beyond the immediate postwar years and into the 1890s. He also engages in an ongoing examination of how Union veterans were perceived by civilians during these decades, mainly in newspaper reports but in Civil War novels as well.

This focus on what might be called the downside of the Civil War veteran's experience offers, of course, a less known, more intriguing, and perhaps more viable research project than would an emphasis on those who handled civilian life well. But it does remind readers that, rather than

being members of a heroic generation in peace as well as war, many of these men were burdened by disappointment and even failure, while civilians perceived them quite often as problems and misfits. Accordingly, the tone of *Sing Not War* is subdued and sometimes even sad.

The heart of this study is contained in four chapters that treat a series of problems confronted by many Union veterans. One chapter, entitled "Maimed Darlings," recounts the struggles and tribulations of veterans who were wounded and disabled. Another describes how veterans' own interest in their wartime experiences combined with the public's fascination with the recent civil war to generate a market for all kinds of commercial opportunism and exploitation, some of it rather crass and demeaning, but all of it resulting in "the commodification of veterans and veteranhood" (p.147). A third chapter, "Regiments So Piteous" (all the chapter-titles, like the title of the book itself, derive from Walt Whitman's "The Return of the Heroes" in the 1881-82 version of

Leaves of Grass) investigates the soldiers' homes that the U.S. government established in the late 1860s and the 1870s. These homes were built to house infirm or poor soldiers who were unable to take care of themselves – a group that numbered about 100,000 if those residing in state homes are counted. Many of these institutions were ultimately investigated in response to residents' complaints of poor treatment and conditions and to grievances from the inhabitants of nearby towns.

Finally, a fourth chapter reveals that veterans and their families faced considerable criticism and resentment in the 1880s and 1890s because of the perceived preferential treatment that they received from the federal government in the form of pensions, whose costs and number of beneficiaries seemed always to be increasing. This kind of hostility was rarely experienced by Confederate veterans – a distinction that Marten offers in one of several comparisons between the treatment and public reception of Union and Confederate veterans. Although faced with a much poorer society and unprotected by the central government under which they had fought, the Confederates were accorded greater respect and appreciation by the southern civilians. Whatever medical aid and financial support Confederate veterans did receive came from the private sector and from those states that could afford to provide it.

James Marten's insightful and deeply researched report on the difficulties that Union veterans encountered on their return to civilian life and the resentment and impatience they later received from non-veterans is a valuable and provocative contribution to the emerging field of Civil War veterans' history. Its contribution would have been greater, however, had the author chosen to assess and interpret his findings. The rather unfocused final chapter, "Sad, Unnatural Shows," might have included a more substantive conclusion, a hint of which is suggested in its subtitle, "Veterans' Identity and Distinctiveness." At all events, this is a fine study that future historians will surely take into account as they determine how all veterans, Union and Confederate as well as black and white, fared when they returned to civilian life and encountered its non-veteran inhabitants. It is this larger project that, as Marten realized early on, is too great for one author to accomplish.

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