

Confederate Exceptionalism: Civil War Myth and Memory in the Twenty-First Century

By Nicole Maurantonio

(Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2019. Pp. x, 236. Illustrations, figures, notes, index. \$32.50.)

Historians have long contemplated the construction of myth and memory stemming from the Confederate Lost Cause. *Confederate Exceptionalism* uses public memory as a lens through which to view the fusion of Lost Cause ideology and American exceptionalism embodied in “textual practices that alternately embrace and revise the Confederacy’s racial history” (p. 2). Maurantonio uses the concept of a museum as an institution that “anchor[s] identities to objects, stories, and people” to argue that “memory makers have capitalized” on such tangible markers to normalize “the myth of Confederate exceptionalism” (pp. 16-17). Her concept of museums thus extends beyond physical structures to include “everything from cookbooks to monuments, taxidermied horses to living historians” in the state of Virginia (p. 17).

Using a diverse array of voices, Maurantonio argues that in this continually evolving space of public memory, “the neo-Confederate museum that is Virginia is a dynamic entity that enables continued and continuous engagement with the colliding forces of memory and history” (p. 17). Viewing the state of Virginia in this way helps us to understand better how “the myth of Confederate exceptionalism” converts those willing to believe (p. 18).

In this way, the author illuminates the tactics of “memory makers” and the expectations of the museum, broadly defined. Throughout the book, she illustrates her points with tangible objects, sites, or people significant to Virginia’s residents and affecting those beyond its borders.

In keeping with Maurantonio’s museum theme, this review provides a “tour” of the highlights. One chapter surveys a landscape dotted with the death and remembrance of General Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson, with artifact stops including but not limited to: Little Sorrel’s taxidermied body at Virginia Military Institute, Jackson’s left arm, and a blanket reportedly with him in his final hours. “Taken together,” Maurantonio writes, “they curate a set of experiences across the Commonwealth that instantiate the myth of Confederate exceptionalism through museal practice” (p. 45). Another chapter discusses women’s central role as custodians of Confederate memory, exemplified by their push to sell “the Confederacy as a site of both physical and spiritual nourishment” through cooking (p. 94). Because cookbooks are presented under the guise of neutrality, they appeal to many and enable the Confederacy to “creep into the American home” (p. 95). Maurantonio

highlights how people consumed these books, their history, and the food that they presented, while African Americans fought for their lives and rights. Further discussion of recipe origins that white southerners passed as their own would, however, have been beneficial.

Confederate Exceptionalism's final chapter relays the perils of the digital realm, specifically addressing how social media offers a powerful medium for neo-Confederates to share and express their views. Maurantonio discusses memes specifically created for "#TarpWars," a parody of Star Wars, and "#SouthernAvenger," which was originally referenced as "#ConfederateAvenger" by Virginia Flaggers (p. 154). The Flaggers are a group of mostly older white men and women who stand with Confederate flags and protest against those who attack their ancestors and "heritage." The term #TarpWars stems from statues of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson being "shrouded in large black tarps" by the Charlottesville city council (p. 145). Similarly, #SouthernAvenger referenced the actions of a Richmond resident who

removed tarps covering Confederate statues and was "barred from the parks and charged with trespassing and vandalism" (p. 156). Through these memes, we understand the Virginia Flaggers' "dissociation from reality" and their continual self-presentation as heroes in their narrative (p. 154). Maurantonio argues that the Flaggers' ability to draw on "mainstream popular culture," with an ideology "as American as rock music and Hollywood," positions them as "mainstream and harmless" (p. 161).

Before the preface, Maurantonio provides readers with a concise note on her use of language, capitalization, and terminology. Each of the chapters that follow demonstrates a felt connection to the past through participation. This beautifully written and engaging book will make an excellent addition to any graduate or undergraduate course, serving as an educational tool to demystify the hold that Confederate exceptionalism continues to wield over the United States.

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doi: 10.2979/indimagahist.116.3.06

