

Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape.* Kirk Savage. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. 408pp.

Reviewed by Edward T. Linenthal

Kirk Savage, author of *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997), has offered readers a brilliant biography of the United States' most significant memorial space, the Washington Mall. There have been previous histories of the Mall, although as Savage points out, the 19th century landscape has been largely ignored. But Savage does not just provide a chronology of change. He makes a compelling argument that the dynamic transformations of this particular memorial landscape reveal a “sea change in how Americans have understood and interacted with public monuments. From objects of reverence and emulation...monuments became spaces of reflection and psychological engagement” (p. 12).

Savage frames his biography in what he characterizes as a “shift in sensibility” (p. 14), from the 19th century concept of public ground, indicating a landscape that “could be seen, felt, smelled, trampled, planted” (p. 69), to the 20th century concept of public space, in which the ground was “little more than a platform for the display of spatial effects” (p. 15). In the immediate post Civil-War years, the Mall was little more than a series of “leisure zones...fringed by working operations such as railroad stations, greenhouses, arboretums, and even brothels” (p. 64). However, the completion of the Washington Monument signaled this change in sensibility, but ultimately failed to offer a “message of unity,” since it was “a project built on ambiguity” (p. 141).

The interpretive take on the Lincoln Memorial and the Grant Memorial is most significant for readers interested in the origins of what Savage has called “the therapeutic memorial...made expressly to heal a collective psychological injury” (p. 267). For Savage, these two memorials did not offer easy resolution to the issues of slavery and war, and anticipated in several important ways the later rise of “victim” monuments, such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

Savage smartly addresses the rise of “Triumphal Gigantism”—expressed in the Marine Corps War Memorial, dedicated in 1954, and the bizarre Boy Scout Memorial, dedicated in 1964. By the time his focus reaches the Mall as a site of protest across the ideological spectrum in post World War II America, readers will no longer be surprised that the Mall has been a tumultuous space, whose sense of stability and permanence are illusory. Savage is also admirably restrained in his take on the emergence of the World War II Memorial, whose “greatest victory is probably its conquest of the Mall” (p. 300). The rise of victim memorials engenders its own set of issues: whose suffering does one honor on the Mall? There is no question that the creation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum sparked energies for the creation of the National Museum of the American Indian, and the forthcoming National Museum of African American History and

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Culture. Savage concludes by offering a “modest proposal for the Mall,” a moratorium on monument building for a decade. Instead, he proposes experiments in temporary memorials, which would, ideally, envision the Mall as a place for “open conversation,” rather than a quest for “an immutable national essence” (p. 312).

I noticed two errors easily corrected in a paperback edition. 168 people, not 169, were murdered in the Oklahoma City bombing, and while the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum has received federal funding, it was not built with federal funds. It was built on federal lands, but it was financed through an ambitious fund-raising campaign.

Finally, this is a physically beautiful book. The photographs and drawings are an essential part of the story, and Savage uses them very well. *Monument Wars* should be a “must-read” for colleagues in many disciplines and for anyone interested in the evolution of America’s memorial landscape and the unique qualities of contemporary memorial culture.

Reference Cited

Savage, Kirk

1997 *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

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