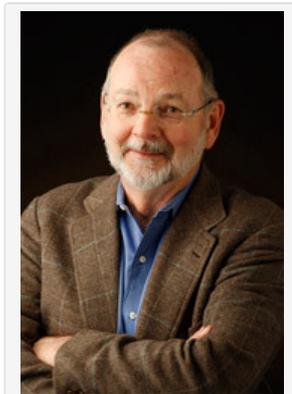


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"A LATE ENCOUNTER WITH THE CIVIL WAR," BY MICHAEL KREYLING

 APRIL 8, 2015 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)  [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)



Michael Kreyling

Reviewed by Allen Mendenhall

Now that it's 2015, the sesquicentennial of the Civil War has come to a close. Those who don't follow such anniversaries may not have noticed it was ever here, but it was, although without the fanfare or nostalgia that marked the commemorations at the semi-centennial and the centennial.

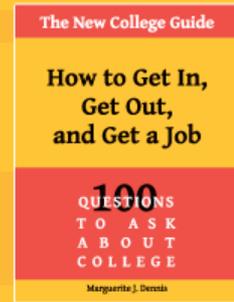
Michael Kreyling, a professor of English at Vanderbilt University with an endowed chair and several books to his credit, brings a literary touch to his brief history of the Civil War—not of its battles and heroes and victims and villains but of the manner in which Americans have recalled those things over time. A history about history, conceived as a series of lectures, *A Late Encounter With the Civil War* bears a title that seems to apply as aptly to Kreyling (he's had a long and distinguished career in literature but hasn't worked extensively in the field of Civil War studies) as it does to the current era's strained connection with the bloodiest conflict the nation has ever experienced.

Kreyling focuses on "collective memory," a concept he purports to borrow from Maurice Halbwachs and Emile Durkheim and the premise of which is "that humans assemble or construct memory in the context of social life: we remember what our social groups require us to remember in order to maintain historical continuity over time and to claim our membership in them." Collective memory is participatory rather than commanded, evolutionary rather than fixed, fluctuating rather than static; it emerges out of the conversations people within a given territory have regarding a particular event.

Kreyling is, of course, concerned with our collective memory of the Civil War. It is unclear which individuals enforce or control the regime of collective memory according to his paradigm, but presumably he means to suggest that all members of the community are at least partially complicit in the narrative perpetuation that becomes collective memory.

From the premise of collective memory Kreyling sets out to establish the *constructedness* of Southern narratives about the war and thereby to refute the assumption of Pierre Nora, who once claimed that "[d]ifferent versions of the Revolution or the Civil War do not threaten the American tradition because, in some sense, no such thing exists—or, if it does, it is not primarily a historical construction." Kreyling submits, *contra* Nora, that historical memory *is* constructed because it involves both gradual initiation and exclusion: those who understand and promote the validated, official account are admitted into the group, members of which celebrate a shared past, whereas those who challenge the authorized narratives are marginalized or altogether excluded from the group. What the approved story of the Civil War is at the moment of the sesquicentennial remains unknown because, he says, only years after

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such a landmark can we objectively evaluate its cultural reception and narrative production.

Collective memory is not the same thing as personal memory. It is a “kind of complicated puppet theater” inasmuch as “we are the puller of strings” as well as “the figures pulled.” We not only “set dates for ceremonies of public memory and fill the ceremonies with choreographed activities” but also allow ourselves to be dragged along with such ceremonies; we resort to ritualistic commemoration to project the past onto our present, he explains, and to attempt to define ourselves both by and against our past.

Kreyling argues in his opening chapter that “the United States that formally remembered the Civil War at the semicentennial was different from the America of the centennial and sesquicentennial by one very powerful theme we can identify in retrospect: blood.” The subject of blood leads Kreyling into meandering discussions of *The Great Gatsby* and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. This chapter becomes less about the memory of the Civil War and more about early 20th-century eugenicist fascinations with blood, an element of romanticized fiction that is “latent symbolic” or “cultural” because it “invades or pollutes the endangered citadel of whiteness.”

Theodore Roosevelt used the term “race suicide” to express a widely shared fear of racial degeneration, which was linked, Kreyling alleges, to a perceived collapse of civilization. Kreyling ties Roosevelt’s term to both the creation of and reaction to popular works by D. W. Griffith and Thomas Dixon Jr. He even implicates Woodrow Wilson in the rapid proliferation of racism—and not just by recalling Wilson’s oft-discussed response to the screening of *The Birth of a Nation* in the White House.

The second chapter maps the shift from memorialization to mass anxiety as race-relations in America forced the nation to reconsider the meaning and purpose of the Civil War. Here Kreyling considers an array of figures, from Bruce Catton and Robert Penn Warren to Edmund Wilson and Flannery O’Connor, to substantiate the proposition that public interest in the Civil War was on the wane and overshadowed by the Civil Rights Movement and the Cold War. All of this is very interesting, but we shouldn’t be surprised that most of the population at that time was more interested in its present moment than in a war that had occurred a century earlier.

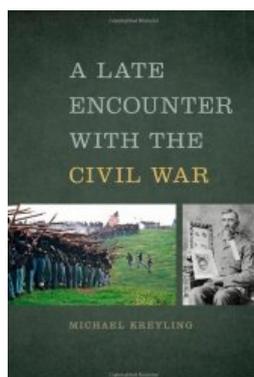
The third and final chapter speculates about those “negotiations” that we have “between what *did* happen” during the Civil War and “what we would prefer to remember.” I say “speculates” because Kreyling is careful not to seem rash or conclusory about our own moment. Rather than giving an answer, for instance, he says that “we need to ask” the question “[w]here is the South now?” That we may ask that question at all shows how much different our generation is from those which came before, as Kreyling demonstrates by surveying recent literary scholarship on the matter.

Wherever the South is now, it seems to have traveled far from “pure ancestor worship.” That doesn’t mean our memory has become unproblematic. Kreyling sees in the historical fiction of Newt Gingrich and William R. Forstchen, for example, a disturbing turn to a counterfactual mode of ritual that distorts our understanding of past events. Kreyling rounds out his discussion of Gingrich and Forstchen (among other people and texts) with an upsetting observation: “we commemorate past wars with new ones.” Such a strong and ambiguous claim demands clarification, yet Kreyling doesn’t elaborate, perhaps because long explication would detract from the lasting force and profundity of the closing remark.

As smoothly as this book reads, one wonders what its chief contribution will be. It’s certainly unique and innovative to, as Kreyling does, compare vampire fiction with the racist notion of thoroughbred whiteness that was in circulation at the semicentennial. On the other hand, there might be a good reason why this approach hasn’t been tried, and it’s not because no one has thought of it.

When a book doesn’t move professional historiography in a direction that unearths obscure details, that adds to the sum of knowledge on a precise topic, or that sheds light on events by examining them from the unexplored perspective of cultural outsiders, it can rely too heavily on style and creativity and entertainment value. Kreyling’s book isn’t devoid of scholarship, but it does push the bounds of that genre. Perhaps its greatest achievement is its capacity to raise provocative questions about our present relationship to a conflict that in some ways seems so distant, but in others so familiar.

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About Allen Mendenhall

Allen Mendenhall is a writer, attorney, and educator. His book Literature and Liberty (Rowman & Littlefield / Lexington Books) was released in 2014. He blogs at The Literary Lawyer. Visit his website at [AllenMendenhall.com](#).



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