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Living Monuments: Confederate Soldiers' Homes in the New South (Book Review)

Edward L. Ayers

University of Richmond, eyers@richmond.edu

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R. B. ROSENBERG. *Living Monuments: Confederate Soldiers' Homes in the New South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 1993. Pp. xiii, 240.

Some historians have argued that the "Cult of the Lost Cause" helped the white South reintegrate itself into the nation's economy and culture after 1865; other historians have argued that the reverence for the Confederacy was a genuinely reactionary force in the South, opposed to reconciliation with the Yankees and modernity. R. B. Rosenberg examines this issue from the ground up. We do not read here of evanescent rhetoric or ceremonies, but of bricks and mortar, legislature and central office, aging men and a forgetful society. The Lost Cause looks different because of this book.

Rosenberg casts a critical eye on the gap between word and deed, ideal and practice. He chronicles the disregard, resentment, and impatience with which the New South treated ex-Confederates when it was not extolling their wartime valor. The homes, despite the rhetoric and hopes with which they were launched, quickly became depressing places where elderly men waited to die. Legislative wrangling, editorial wars, foot-dragging, and grudging appropriations preceded the opening of the homes. The new buildings filled with veterans whose wounds and amputations had never healed, whose ability to support themselves had long since passed, whose families were dead or neglectful. Regimentation and surveillance hounded the inmates, who spent much of their time furtively drinking or dulling themselves with patent medicines.

Rosenberg details the grim struggle between these somewhat ghostly veterans and their keepers. He has gathered what systematic information there is, tallying the characteristics of those admitted and those expelled, the enrollments and the expenses. He presents haunting photographs and bits of poetry written by the inmates, testifying to their despair and cynicism. He tries to account for the dates the homes were opened and closed, tries to discern their larger meanings. What Rosenberg finds may not be startling, but the cumulative effect of his chapters is powerful.

Ironically, the more we study the symbols of southern distinctiveness, such as these Confederate veterans' homes, the more we see how much the postwar South shared with the North. As with veterans' organizations and their various auxiliaries, the South actually fell behind the North in expressing its respect and reverence for the soldiers of the past. The major difference was that the victorious North enjoyed the luxuries of victory and a bulging federal treasury, whereas the South had to piece together its "cult" from defeat and state funding. Rosenberg shows us how little concrete reward the soldiers of the Confederacy received once the guns stopped and the rush into the future began.

EDWARD L. AYERS
University of Virginia