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Battle Hymns: The Power and Popularity of Music in the Civil War

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But he provides no analysis specific to the wartime experience of the state. Students of Iowa history may well ponder whether religious forces have been adequately addressed in the state's Civil War narratives. Rable's book is a source for topics that can be more thoroughly explored within an Iowa context, and it provides a broader national perspective with which Iowa's experience can be compared.

Battle Hymns: The Power and Popularity of Music in the Civil War, by Christian McWhirter. Civil War America Series. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. vii, 336 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 cloth.

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The experience is not uncommon. It is the weekend at a college, perhaps a school in the South, perhaps one in Iowa. Toward evening, students and professors make their way across College Avenue or University Street, going to the library, a game, or a favorite hangout. Suddenly they are scattered by a massive four-wheel-drive truck. As the machine roars by there are the standard sounds and sights: the "rebel yell" from the cab; the Confederate battle flag embossed on the rear windshield; the receding notes of a horn that plays "Dixie." According to Christian McWhirter, the experience would be a testament to the lasting power of music from the American Civil War.

During the war, McWhirter argues, popular music was both a "weapon" and a "cultural tool." Songs encouraged men to enlist and motivated them to fight and die. They expressed sectional hostilities and served as vehicles for the war's causes. They even allowed for a few antiwar messages. And so Americans of the time took songs very seriously. At the beginning of 1862, for example, the popular Northern singing group, the Hutchinson Family Singers, passed behind Union lines to give a series of concerts and buoy the spirits of the troops. During their first concert, they sang a song with lyrics by the poet John Greenleaf Whittier, lyrics that specifically named slavery as the cause of the war. Some in the crowd hissed; others came to the singers' defense. For a moment it looked like a brawl would break out. The next day the order came down from the top, from, it seems, General George McClellan himself: the Hutchinsons were banished from the Union lines. Here, McWhirter's focus on music succeeds not just in providing a different approach to the Civil War but in telling a new story. As this

story shows, slavery was always the war's cause, even if recognition of that fact had to be suppressed.

Another story provides insight into the war's transition from memory to politics. Here, McWhirter's focus is on turn-of-the-century arguments about the best-known Confederate anthem. "Dixie," he notes, was a controversial choice in this regard. First, it was by a Northerner, the Ohio-born minstrel Dan Decatur Emmett. Second, it was a "black-face" song, a tune with largely nonsensical lyrics in a stage version of black dialect. For years Southerners tried to improve on the song. The most concerted effort came around 1900, when a faction in the United Daughters of the Confederacy proposed a new version with lyrics that were pro-South and anti-Yankee. Ultimately the effort failed: Confederate veterans preferred their old camp favorite and stood against the changes. Yet the effort did succeed in politicizing the song: "Dixie" became a musical signifier for the Confederate "Lost Cause," "states' rights," and rural anti-intellectualism.

Between these anecdotes, which succeed in grounding music in lived experience and in telling new stories about the war and its effects, McWhirter largely resorts to ground covered elsewhere. Northern men joined the Union army to the strains of an enlistment song, "We Are Coming Father Abraham." Southern men responded to "The Bonnie Blue Flag," enlisting, as one of the song's verses had it, to preserve their "property." In Union and Confederate camps, men passed the hours by singing: they belted out blackface ditties like "Zip Coon"; they laughingly shouted the comic song "Goober Peas;" they harmonized on sentimental favorites such as "Just Before the Battle, Mother." Battlefield anthems motivated men to fight. For Union soldiers it was "John Brown's Body"; for Confederate troops it was "Stonewall Jackson's Way." Meanwhile, civilians sang songs to support the troops, vent grief, or even question the war, songs such as "The Homespun Dress," "The Vacant Chair," and "When This Cruel War Is Over."

Battle Hymns is a welcome addition to the historiography of the Civil War and the music of the period. Much of the book is standard stuff. But there is new ground here as well. Popular music, McWhirter suggests, allows for the expression of controversial topics and forbidden subjects. Accordingly, it sheds new light on the eradication of slavery as a popular cause of the war. It also reveals how the causes of the Confederacy remained alive and made their way into the cultural mainstream. Indeed, as anyone who has seen and heard the roaring truck with the rear-window battle flag and the horn that plays "Dixie" can attest, the South's "Lost Cause" has both lived on and gone national.