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## American Oracle: The Civil War in the Civil Rights Era

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points out that men bearing guns often take what they want from unarmed civilians. Finally, Union generals came to understand that only by living off the land could their armies overcome logistical shortages and undertake the operations, as Sherman put it, necessary to “illustrate the vulnerability of the South” (251).

As large numbers of Iowans and midwesterners served with the Union armies of the Tennessee, the Cumberland, the Gulf, the Mississippi, and the Ohio, *The Civil War in the West* has much to interest readers of this journal. Hess emphasizes, for example, the economic and psychological importance of the Mississippi valley to residents of the Old Northwest. Abraham Lincoln understood these regional sensibilities much better than did his fellow Kentuckian Jefferson Davis.

Finally, the extensive attention Hess devotes to the challenges of occupying huge chunks of Confederate territory and dealing with thousands of black and white refugees highlights the North’s wartime achievements between the Appalachians and the Mississippi. Victory in the west, as he demonstrates, was hardly inevitable; rather, it stemmed from the North’s more creative use of technology, superior resource management, recruitment of thousands of black Southerners to the Union cause, and development of policies that enabled them to occupy and control immense chunks of hostile territory while at the same time assembling field armies large enough to defeat the enemy.

*American Oracle: The Civil War in the Civil Rights Era*, by David W. Blight. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011. 314 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$27.95 cloth.

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In his study of Civil War memory, David W. Blight examines how the historical subjects of slavery and emancipation were marginalized during the Civil War Centennial in the context of the civil rights era. Blight examines the works of four prominent American writers in the mid-twentieth century—Robert Penn Warren, Bruce Catton, Edmund Wilson, and James Baldwin—“because they represent divergent backgrounds, genres, and points of view” (8). *American Oracle* provides a rich and probing analysis of the writers’ “literary and historical meditations on the Civil War during its Centennial years” (252). For the distinguished author and meticulous researcher of the award-winning *Race and Reconciliation: The Civil War in American Memory* (2001), the

Centennial must have been a bitter disappointment because with few exceptions it romanticized and sentimentalized the sectional conflict at the expense of obfuscating a central thesis in the historian's scholarship: that race has played a pivotal role in defining American history over the past 150 years.

Blight finds much to admire in the Civil War works of poet and novelist Robert Penn Warren, but he is hard pressed to explain why the southern author was reluctant to showcase the problematic relationship between the Centennial and the struggle for civil rights for African Americans in the 1960s. *Wilderness: A Tale of the Civil War* (1961), a haunting novel about a German immigrant who comes to the United States during the New York City draft riots of 1863, is an "allegory about the quest of humans for self-knowledge and freedom" (46). In his extended contemplation of the different meanings of the sectional conflict, *The Legacy of the Civil War* (1961), Warren, as portrayed by Blight, was an ambivalent and conflicted artist who satirized "Southern racists" (66), defended "authentic nobility in the Confederate war effort" (67), and "spent many pages railing against the dangers of radical abolitionists" (70). Blight provides ample evidence that *Wilderness* and *Legacy* offered an alternative viewpoint to the "moralistic nostalgia of the Centennial" (51), but he fails to demonstrate that the author's writings were specifically informed by the "civil rights struggle of his own time" (64).

Blight's misgivings about the Centennial are tempered by Bruce Catton, a midwesterner, journalist, and gifted storyteller who wrote popular narrative histories of the conflict that resonated with readers seeking an escape from the Cold War. In *The Coming Fury* (1961), *Terrible Swift Sword* (1963), and *Never Call Retreat* (1965), Catton "harnessed a good portion of those millions of Americans who still knew the Civil War as intimate family history, who had absorbed its lore from parents and grandparents" (108). Nevertheless, Blight saves some of his harshest criticism for the writer who had been selected to serve on the Civil War Centennial Commission: "Catton almost always wrote about the Civil War with a sense of the epic, and of romance and an appeal to the nostalgic, as well as his own brand of realism" (82). Blight takes Catton to task for neglecting to include African Americans in his histories and concludes that their absence in Catton's works was "a perfect representation of mainstream America's broad ignorance of the African American experience generally" (115).

Blight writes more favorably of the literary critic and northeasterner Edmund Wilson, the author of *Patriotic Gore* (1962), who completed a lengthy volume on Civil War literature in the midst of the Centennial:

"The book endures because of the unprecedented literary history it presented at the time of the Centennial" (145–46). Even as Blight applauds Wilson for introducing readers to a plethora of writers who had been ignored for decades, he blasts the writer for "his apparent Southern sympathies" (149) and his marginalization of African American writers. And Blight is incensed by Wilson's position on the war. A fervent antiwar intellectual, Wilson believed that there was nothing redeeming about the Civil War. "Wilson had long since decided," Blight observes, "that the Civil War had, in the long run, not really been worth it" (179).

For Blight, it is James Baldwin, the Harlem-born African American intellectual and prolific writer of novels, plays, and essays, who provided an eloquent and impassioned counterpoint to the Centennial: "Baldwin made himself into an alternative African American voice responding to the cacophony and orthodoxy of Centennial popular culture" (187). He articulated his dismay about America in *The Fire Next Time* (1963), an essay that Blight contends was the author's "attempt to hurl Jeremiah's thunderbolt down on his countrymen in their slumber" (224). Baldwin's work was not only a call to action for blacks and whites to address racial inequality in the 1960s but was also a cautionary tale about the "'spiritual wasteland' that Americans risked creating in their crisis over civil rights" (228). Unfortunately for Blight's portrayal of Baldwin as a spoiler of the Centennial, "Baldwin only occasionally wrote directly about the Civil War; his subject, rather, was America's enduring dilemma with race and its searing effects on his own life" (187).

It is striking that Blight does not devote more of his analysis to the actors and the activities surrounding the Centennial. He often refers to the Centennial but offers no focused discussion of the subject. In effect, his marginalization of the Centennial mirrors the elision of slavery and emancipation in the writings of the four writers.

At the heart of Blight's disenchantment with the Centennial is his assumption that emancipation is the defining legacy of the Civil War and that it should have been the touchstone for writers examining the conflict in the midst of the civil rights era. Gary W. Gallagher provides a compelling argument in *The Union War* (2011) that "the focus on emancipation and race" in Civil War scholarship in the past 40 years "suggests the war had scant meaning apart from those issues" (4). It is telling that Blight's analysis of the Civil War writers of the 1960s shines the most when he holds his ideological judgment about race in abeyance as he marvels at the many ways the Civil War was represented in the writings of Warren, Catton, Wilson, and Baldwin.