

Books Review

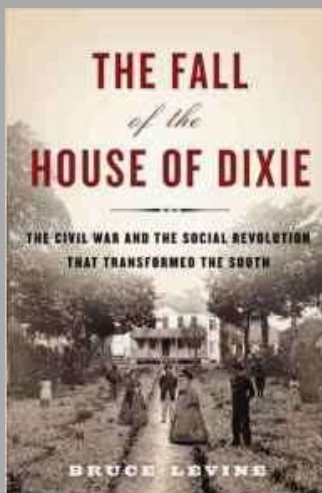
The Fall of the House of Dixie -- The Civil War and the Social Revolution that Transformed the South (2013) Random House by Bruce Levine

After the Civil War -- The Heroes, Villains, Soldiers, and Civilians Who Changed America (2015) National Geographic by James Robertson

Marching Home -- Union Veterans and Their Unending Civil War (2014) Liveright Publishing by Brian Matthew Jordan

For many of us, we tend to think of the Civil War ending sometime in 1865, perhaps at Appomattox when R.E. Lee surrendered his army, or when Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, or when the victorious Union armies paraded through the streets of Washington, DC, or finally when Kirby Smith surrendered the last Confederate force. However for many individuals living in various regions of what had once been, and would soon again be, the United States these endings merely marked new beginnings with various types of challenges, or even opportunities. These three books address what life was about for individuals, and even communities, once the guns were silenced.

As reflected in their titles, each of these books has a different perspective upon post-belligerency life and circumstances. Taken together, however, they present features of American life that are not often discussed in most histories.



In *The Fall of the House of Dixie*, Bruce Levine, a distinguished professor of history at the University of Illinois, describes in graphic detail the process of the devastation that befell the South as Federal armies began to occupy additional territory. Levine notes that prior to hostilities many sectors of the South enjoyed the pleasures and benefits of wealth that were unequalled in the rest of the nation. Of course much of that wealth rested upon slave labor, whether it be in the agricultural fields, in factories, in various shops. And although many Whites did not own slaves, for various, complex reasons, the South's, indeed much of the entire

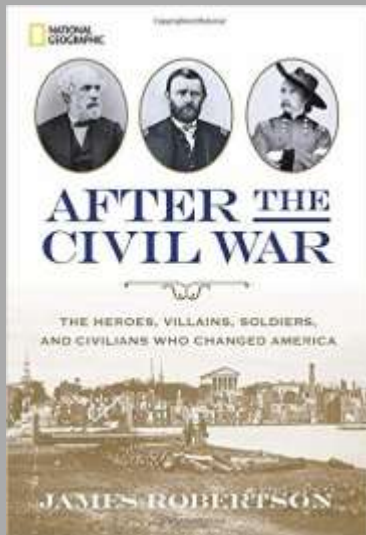
nation's, political and cultural structure was dominated by the planters who of course had no incentive to relinquish their privileged status.

However that status began to disintegrate, sometimes precipitously, even before the guns were silenced especially as Federal armies gained occupation of cities and tracts of Southern territory. Although the Anaconda plan had been widely derided at its inception, in reality once Federal troops began to occupy coastal areas, including major cities such as New Orleans, supplies began to become more difficult to find and to deliver; moreover, as Federal troops began to approach planters began to abandon their plantations before moving further inland in order to keep their slaves from escaping.

Levine reminds us of the history of slavery in the South and thereafter divides his chapters around the phases of the war. The book relies in large part upon diaries, letters, newspaper articles, as well as governmental documents to give a clear account of the changes taking place as the war progressed. Levine successfully shows how much of the social fabric in the South began to unravel as the war progressed. A great deal of his book also describes the changes in the relationship between slaves and their former owners but Northern attitudes about the races are not ignored. Among other things, many Northerners are shown to be racists in their own rights; in particular the racist attitudes of William T. Sherman are brought to the fore.

The author also reminds us that the revolution enveloping the South soon reached its "apogee" when forces committed to restoring white supremacy launched a counterattack described as a "ruthless bloody campaign of terror and intimidation." Although there was considerable backsliding, especially in the South, on the national level much progress had been made as the interests of northern manufacturing and commerce gained political control. And while freed slaves and their descendants still had to endure many deprivations, the fruits of emancipation nevertheless helped to advance the causes of greater liberty and equality, albeit with pitfalls and setbacks along the way.

In summary, this book should be highly recommended as a means of gaining better understanding of Southern lives, Black and White, after the Civil War.



After the Civil War is probably the least enlightening of these three books. Although written by a distinguished historian, James Robertson who has written several award winning books, it tends to be formulaistic and superficial. In contrast with the Civil War, which could be disorganized, almost random, at times, this National Geographic publication is neatly organized into nine categories or chapters of short biographies of various characters, some of whom were not in the Civil War but simply profited from being at the right time and place.

It is the sort of book that history teachers once loved, chock full of facts and figures but without much insights or judgments about the great struggle. Aside from one chapter devoted to former Rebels, no mention is made of Southerners leading the reader to believe that the former Confederates had almost no life or existence once they returned home.

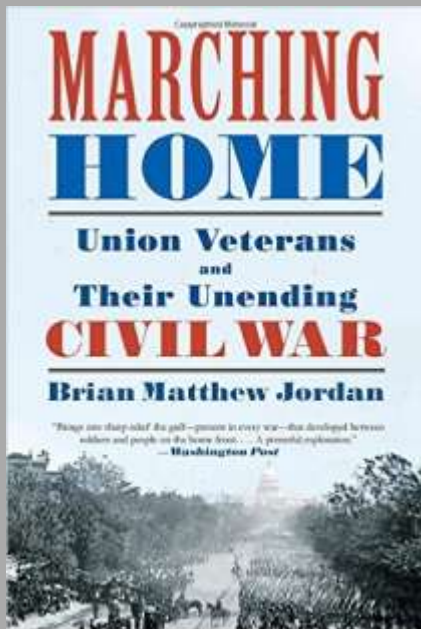
The most revealing section results when Robertson delves somewhat into the Gilded Age and some of the individuals who profited the most from the economy that blossomed after the war. This section covers individuals such as Jay Gould, Andrew Carnegie, and J.P. Morgan who managed to amass unprecedented fortunes, in some cases without the impediment of scruples. While there is some value to learning how these individuals contributed, and benefited, from a newly flourishing economy, the emphasis upon these individuals merely provides a distorted picture of much of the American lifestyle during the latter part of the 19th Century.

Following the Civil War the next major challenge was that of conquering the West, which involved finding the solutions related to the presence of the Native Americans who continued to possess much of the territory coveted by Whites, and stood in the way of desired expansion into these Western territories. As is fairly well known those solutions frequently invoked broken treaties coupled with genocide in some regions. Although Robertson says the expansion effort led to "ruthless subjugation" resulting in one of America's most embarrassing periods, he

still manages to provide a sanitized, incomplete description of actions taken by the former Civil War generals, most notably Philip Sheridan.

The publishers have provided a decent amount of photographs and illustrations but again these fail to provide much depth or more insights about their respective subjects.

In sum, this book is a nice book to have on hand to read during commercials while watching TV. It is also a handy biographical reference but unfortunately it doesn't tell much about the meaning of the Civil War.



Marching Home, a narrative of the Union soldiers as they tried to resume their lives back in their communities, resonated the most with me, probably because some of their experiences resembled my own when I was separated from active duty during the Viet Nam era. Beyond my own personal experience this book is important because it teaches us much about the veterans returning from all wars are regarded. The book's story essentially begins with the veterans' parade through the streets in Washington DC that occurred May 23, 1865; while spectators cheered the marching troops, the soldiers mostly just wanted to return to their families and loved ones, and sensed that there was only a superficial

appreciation for the toil and sacrifices made during their years of military service.

Initially upon their return to their communities they were welcomed warmly and with measures of gratitude. However they veterans soon realized that families and friends often failed to comprehend the true nature of their military service, and for that matter didn't even share the same devotion to the causes for which the veterans had fought. For most of the civilians -- who as a practical matter had minimal contact with the war -- it was over and time to move on while for the returning soldiers the war was a life altering event deeply and permanently embedded in their lives.

Many of the communities had changed dramatically during the soldiers' absence. Mechanism had changed farming, reducing the total reliance upon manual labor. Populations had shifted as men and women sought employment in the cities. Immigration was modifying traditional demographics. The world was changing in ways that frequently were leaving the soldiers behind.

Moreover the war had left a wide range of physical and psychological scars, many which handicapped any chances of gaining decent employment. While the medical practices of the Civil War undoubtedly saved lives the tradeoff of amputated limbs frequently meant that the survivors were unable to do meaningful work. Just as devastating the psychological damage that we now know as post-traumatic stress syndrome left unfortunate veterans in muddled states of nervousness, sleeplessness, irritability and other disabling conditions that were total mysteries to medical science.

Adding to the list of difficulties was rampant alcoholism; whether from boredom between battles, or the fear of being in battles, Civil War soldiers managed to consume vast quantities of alcohol, some becoming addicted for the remainder of their lives. All too frequently drunken veterans parading through a community's streets became public nuisances who were treated with scorn by unsympathetic officials.

As the months passed the estrangement between returning veterans and the public as a whole grew wider and wider. In order to try to accommodate the needs of veterans, especially those who were unable to gain employment, veterans homes were established with some degree of success. However too often the residents of these homes would wander off creating disturbances in the neighborhoods. Eventually veterans associations were created and organized, the most prominent being the Grand Old Army. These groups advocated for more benefits for veterans or indeed tried to provide measure of financial relief.

It's unclear whether Jordan's narrative represents a full picture of the lives of all veterans after the Civil War or whether his narrative is but a small but important slice of the circumstances of veterans during the latter part of the 19th Century. Nevertheless *Marching Home* is a reminder of the challenges that meet any society when veterans return after months or years of combat; unfortunately as evidenced

by the issues that continue to swirl around the Veterans Administration these issues are not easily solved leaving some veterans adrift in the throes of homelessness, emotional distress, physical ailments, or the inability of coping with coming home.

To summarize, this book has to be highly recommended, if only because it tells us much about the lives of many Civil War veterans but also because it should give us pause about veterans of all eras.

Taken together or even separately these books constitute a more clear reflection of life in the latter part of the 19th Century and even beyond into, for instance, the first Black President. We read and study history for what it might teach about our own lives and circumstances; as much as books about battles, these book can teach as a great deal about how we happened to define many of today's social and political issues.