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Megan Kate Nelson, *Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War*. Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2012. Pp. xvii, 332. ISBN 978-0-8203-4251-1.

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In her new book, *Ruin Nation*, Megan Nelson (Harvard), a specialist in American Studies, again focuses on the intersection of culture and the environment.¹ Specifically, she examines the impact of the Civil War's destruction on the American psyche as well as the debate over "civilized" warfare that raged between northerners and southerners before, during, and long after the guns fell silent—the "shared discourse of civilized warfare" concerning what constituted morally just military destruction (11).

A process of change, or "ruination," revealed the war's fundamental duality as both destroyer and creator (2). This dual nature provoked a "torrent of commentary" by Americans marveling at the unleashing of such rapid and devastating destruction on their own soil in the name of preserving the Union. The war's ruins inspired both feelings of awe, bordering on reverence, and tremendous anxiety. Nelson selects specific categories of physical ruins that cohere as an identifiable "material whole." Things destroyed but intact enough to be recognizable produced an interplay between a whole past and a fragmented present.

The book comprises two sections of two chapters each. The first section considers architectural ruins, exploring the destruction of cities (chapter 1) and the ransacking of homes (chapter 2). The second section treats living ruins, namely forests and trees (chapter 3) and male bodies (chapter 4). Nelson concludes with astute observations on Americans' cultural preference for consuming, rather than deeply reflecting on, history.

Chapter 1, "Our Own Pompeii: Ruined Cities," spotlights three cities burned during the Civil War: Hampton, Virginia; Chambersburg, Pennsylvania; and Columbia, South Carolina. Each represents a distinct phase in the evolution of the cultural discourse on civilized war. Nelson's central thesis is that urban ruins gave northerners and southerners, both white and black, the chance to express their anxieties about and perceptions of the conflict.

Confederate soldiers and the town's residents burned Hampton in August 1861 to prevent its use by Union soldiers as a colony for fugitive slaves. This initiated the national discussion of civilized warfare, Nelson asserts, as a vigorous debate between the Confederate and Union commanders over the efficacy of destroying entire towns to preclude their use by the enemy. For Confederates, Hampton symbolized patriotism and self-sacrifice, while Federals saw it as evidence of typical southern rashness, violence, and barbarity. Ironically, its destruction may have facilitated, not forestalled, its conversion into a fugitive-slave settlement, since "later freed people were able to use the rubble to create a landscape of black freedom," in an "act of appropriation and power" (23, 26).

Confederate general Jubal Early's forces burned Chambersburg in 1864 in response to Union general David Hunter's selective use of the torch in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. This redirected the discourse to the distinction between legitimate retaliation and simple revenge. Interestingly, Chambersburg residents felt compelled to defend themselves for not preventing their town's destruction, which also entailed building a case for government compensation. Nelson concludes with the Union army's burning of Columbia in 1865, which she sees as purely an assertion of power through violence, lacking any military justification.

Military historians will find this chapter, and perhaps the book as a whole, oddly disconnected from the historiography of total war and of the Civil War's status as the first modern war. Nelson claims that hard war measures had already emerged with the burning of Hampton. But she fails to adduce relevant scholarly literature to support her position that total war tactics existed "from the earliest days of the war ... [as] many

1. Nelson's first book, *Trembling Earth: A Cultural History of the Okefenokee Swamp* (Athens: U Georgia Pr, 2005), explores the clash of human ambition and optimism with a challenging environment in a unique borderlands region.

Union soldiers regarded the plundering of southern homes as a useful strategy for subduing Confederate civilians” (74–75). Moreover, in characterizing civilized warfare as mid-nineteenth-century Americans defined it, she relies too heavily on works by Francis Lieber and Henry Halleck.² Neither can be construed as having formulated universally understood laws of war, as Nelson implies. Granted that her interest is in American culture and the environment, *Ruin Nation* would be a more effective book had she placed it in the context of recent Civil War scholarship. Her poor grasp of the war’s military history generally is disappointing.

Chapter 2 turns to private homes. Nelson finds, not surprisingly, that Union soldiers exploited these spaces to deal a psychological blow to the South, particularly because women were so closely identified with them: “the transformation of southern homes into piles of debris was an invasion of southern women’s spatial and corporeal privacy” (62). Nelson maintains that this deliberate tactic in the North’s hard war strategy constituted class warfare, since Union soldiers increasingly targeted the homes of wealthy slaveholders. In short, Federal policy was to assault the South’s “most valued institutions—patriarchy, slavery, and the chivalry that protected both—[which] were more rooted in the home than in any other space in the southern landscape” (86).

Northern soldiers’ destruction of slave cabins would seem to weaken Nelson’s class warfare argument. She speculates that it was a case of further undermining the planters’ power. Naturally, white southerners condemned these actions as evidence of northern hypocrisy, since “slaves had unacknowledged and extra-legal rights to their privacy and possessions in those spaces” (94). As proof that slaves’ recognized such rights, Nelson cites the “nearly five hundred claims” that freedmen filed with the Southern Claims Commission in 1871 (94–95). Since almost four million slaves lived in the South in 1860, her argument is unconvincing and southern rhetoric was in this instance completely self-serving. She is on firmer ground in contending that “the slave cabin in ruins represented the death of slavery in the South as well as the complex and often bittersweet experience of emancipation” (97). As with destroyed cities and towns, domestic ruins fed into Lost Cause mythology by supposedly symbolizing southern patriotism, pride, and sacrifice in the face of overwhelming northern savagery; devastation of slave quarters evoked images of contented slaves loyally bound to their former masters in the experience of military defeat and personal loss.

Chapter 3, “Battle Logs,” begins a compelling examination of the ruination of living entities. Civil War soldiers consumed vast quantities of wood to build fortifications and infrastructure as well as for fuel and shelter, transforming southern landscapes as the preferred hard woods were depleted and naturally replaced by soft woods. Beyond the damage inflicted by encamped soldiers, battles often created ghost forests of trees splintered and leveled by shot and shell. Unlike the destruction of cities and homes, the ruination of southern forests provoked in the discourse on war a certain awe at the destructive power of modern military technology, as evidenced, according to Nelson, in the ubiquitous imagery of shot exploding in trees in Civil War battle sketches. From an environmental standpoint, the massive consumption of wood caused soil erosion and exhausted natural resources believed to be inexhaustible. This in turn prefigured the dire environmental effects of postwar economic development on the national landscape.

In chapter 4, Nelson investigates human ruins in her most insightful analysis. The Civil War produced injured bodies on a scale never witnessed in the United States; shattered bodies became “sites on which Americans inscribed a range of social anxieties—including concerns about the impact of warfare on masculinity, the production of ‘machine men,’ and the opportunities that wartime provided for fraudulent behavior” (161). Nelson makes effective use of Civil War sketches and photographs throughout, but especially in this chapter with its cogent interpretation of visual culture. She describes the “Empty Sleeve” narrative, in which the wounded soldier’s lost limb is replaced by “culturally positive virtues that explain and justify its absence” (186)—bravery, patriotism, and manliness. But this symbolism remained “fluid and unstable”: illustration 4.7, Winslow Homer’s *Our Watering-Places: The Empty Sleeve at Newport*,³ published in *Harper’s*

2. Respectively, *Instructions for the Government of Armies of the United States in the Field* (NY: van Nostrand, 1863) and *Elements of International Law and Laws of War* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1866).

3. See Brooklyn Museum – www.miwsr.com/rd/1325.htm.

Weekly in August 1865, shows a woman driving a horse-drawn carriage with a wounded veteran by her side, his head partially covered by the woman's veil as it blows in the breeze. Such unmade and unnatural bodies caused profound unease over the loss of masculinity, shifting gender roles, and the harm done to traditional courtship, marriage, procreation, and domestic relations.

A provocative conclusion takes up the incredible postwar obsession with Civil War artifacts in lieu of any overarching narrative of the war: "This fetishizing of evocative, mnemonic objects—and the simultaneous and rapid erasure of Civil War ruins within a generation of the war's end—reveals a tendency in American culture to consume rather than directly confront the past" (229). This judgment is unfairly presentist. Americans are not alone in collecting relics to achieve a "period rush" devoid of any broader significance and divorced from a master narrative. Arguing that the United States is "A Nation of Traces," Nelson faults postwar Americans for not appreciating the historical meaning of wartime ruins and instead merely expunging them to achieve reconciliation—"ruins of war ... have no place in America's material and spatial memory of the conflict," owing to a "widespread cultural aversion" (234–35).

Nelson writes that "Americans have dealt with [the Civil War's] legacy by maintaining battlefields as gloriously pristine fields of green grass and largely omitted the violent debris that battles actually created.... These places produce nostalgia rather than a true understanding of the past" (238). But, one wonders, what else could they have done? Preserve battle-scarred landscapes to enable twenty-first-century Americans to better conceptualize the war's costs? The ravages of war exist nowhere in nature apart from human society and will be wiped clean with or without man's interference. The National Park Service, which maintains many Civil War battlefields, has, Nelson argues, allowed Americans to be nostalgic without confronting them with the true horrors of war, a phenomenon "perhaps more insidious than merely forgetting Without its ruins, we cannot fully understand the terrifying nature of wartime violence and the complex and contradictory nation that it created" (238–39). This is asking a lot of our historic places. It is naïve and self-ish to believe our ancestors should have managed Civil War's ruins to serve posterity's purposes. As it is, they have furthered the more important goals of national healing, forgetting, rebuilding, and, as Nelson admits, the reconciliation of North and South.