



Psychological Consequences of the American Civil War by R. Gregory Lande.

Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2017. Pp. vii, 246. ISBN 978-1-4766-6737-9.

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The American Civil War transformed the social and political fabric of the United States. It destroyed slavery, expanded the federal government, and mobilized over three million men for military service. In *Psychological Consequences of the American Civil War*, independent scholar R. Gregory Lande explores how a society fractured by war “confronted the lingering psychological consequences that followed four brutal years of deprivation, distrust, and death” (1), as its civilians and veterans struggled to make sense of the war’s carnage and destruction. The book’s subjects, including substance abuse, fraudulent physicians, depression, spiritualism, patent medicines, and crime, demonstrate the challenges facing postwar Americans.

Lande states that his “personal experiences in forensic psychiatry and addiction medicine have contributed insights that collectively informed my analysis of the social forces shaping America’s postwar period.” With an audience of general readers in mind, he uses a fluid writing style, short, punchy paragraphs, and extended narration.¹ He takes little notice of previous scholarship on his subject, but promises a work different in “scope and analysis” from that of “many other eminent historians” (2). In the absence of any specific mention of those historians in his main text, readers are left to wonder just what makes his account distinctive.

The book comprises a preface and seven thematically organized chapters. Lande moves briskly from event to event and person to person, guided by a central theme that carries across several fronts. Chapter 1, “Sadness and Suicide,” for example, describes how wartime homesickness morphed into debilitating nostalgia and a concomitant “rash of suicides” (34). Chapter 4, “Intemperance,” concerns the spike in postwar alcoholism, while 5, “Carnival of Crime,” explains how “Depression-driven dissipation” (151) drove up crime rates. The author maintains that “The riveting impact of a war now concluded left society rudderless, drifting toward a reflective introversion and anomie. Against this backdrop, brooding intensified, cynicism increased, and social outlets dried up. For an increasing number of individuals, the nihilistic spiral ended in suicide” (29).

This is not an argument-driven work but rather a broad investigation of a pervasive American postwar social malaise: “Emotional turmoil from four years of civil war contributed to decades of mayhem, misery, and malevolence on a scale unprecedented in America’s short history” (193). To bolster such assertions, Lande canvasses census data, newspaper articles, personal correspondence, medical journals, and popular periodicals. While the resulting study contains interesting stories and makes some solid claims, it also postulates several tenuous connections between the Civil War and postwar upheaval. Chapter 4, for example, adduces census data showing that higher mortality rates in postbellum America were attributable to “venereal diseases, alcoholism, ... diseases of the liver, ... accidents of all kinds, and suicides” (100). Yet, as Lande himself notes, “the full impact of intemperance during the

1. The writing is sometimes overwrought, exhibiting a fetish for alliteration—“deprivation, distrust, and death” (1), “doubters, desperate, disconnected, discontented, depressed, dishonest, and drained” (193)—a tendency to repeat certain phrases, e.g., “compassion and condemnation” (28, 30, 36)—and wording that borders on the inflammatory: “The carnival of crime smothered society, snuffing out every attempt to explain or control it” (147).

Civil War and in the following decades is nearly impossible” (99) to assess. In this case, the inferred causal link between wartime and postwar alcohol abuse and higher death rates is entirely plausible. Lande’s treatment of spiritualism in chapter 2, “A Loss of Faith,” is less compelling. It dwells so long on antebellum-era spiritualism and famous practitioners like the Fox family and Cora Hatch as to overshadow the author’s stated aim to show how the Civil War created “fertile ground for the rapid growth of Spiritualism” (39). Lande concedes that, though the war produced many easily preyed-upon “disillusioned victims” (75), “only skimpy evidence documenting Civil War soldiers’ feelings about Spiritualism seems to exist” (59). Presenting a string of incidents and stories, however fascinating, does not effectively explain how the war changed Americans’ spiritual thinking, a subject well elucidated by others.²

Finally, certain claims suffer from lack evidence or ignorance of relevant scholarship. For example, Lande uses Gen. Ulysses S. Grant in his discussion of intemperance. Grant famously developed a drinking problem during his antebellum military service and the press often criticized him for drunkenness, correctly or not, during the war. Relying on a nineteenth-century biography,³ Lande describes Grant as too drunk to participate in the battle of Shiloh (6–7 April 1862), in order to set up his narrative of the general’s conquest of his intemperance later in the war (113). In fact, Grant spent the night of the sixth with his troops in the field and personally coordinated the counterassaults that routed the Confederate forces the next day.

The gripping, often troubling tales told in *Psychological Consequences of the American Civil War* shed welcome light on the effects of the “furious forces unleashed by four years of war” (10) long after Appomattox. R. Gregory Lande’s lively investigation of the world created by the Civil War will intrigue and instruct a wide general audience, if not specialist readers.

2. E.g., Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2008).

3. W.H. Van Orden, *Life of General U.S. Grant: Together with His Military Services* (New York, 1885).