

To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism. Cecilia Elizabeth O’Leary. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001. Pp. xiii, 365. \$55.00 (U.S.) (Cloth); \$17.95 (U.S.) (Paper); £37.95 (Cloth); £11.50 (Paper).

Cecilia O’Leary’s book is a densely-researched treatise of social and political history whose subject matter is American nationalism in the 1865-1918 period. In this respect, the volume has much in common with the work of cultural historians such as John Bodnar, Michael Kammen and David Lowenthal, although with arguably more emphasis on political processes. Its vast subject is viewed primarily through the prism of two patriotic voluntary organizations, the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) and the Women’s Relief Corps (WRC). However, the work reaches out to encompass a substantially wider terrain of gender, racial, ethnic, and ideological sub-themes. Moreover, the work traces the institutional connections between the main patriotic societies and various levels of political and social power.

The opening chapter nicely situates the work within the contemporary literature on nationalism--both inside and outside the United States. In general, a modernist-constructivist approach is employed, although the author allows for the importance of popular “resonance” at various places within the book. The first chapter contends, along the lines suggested by Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner, that American identity was primarily local rather than national prior to the Civil War. The diverse ways in which July Fourth was celebrated attest to this, as does the lack of a consistent attitude towards commemoration in the antebellum period. Commercial souvenirs rather than public monuments predominated, and neither the Stars and Stripes nor the Star Spangled Banner possessed the symbolic charge they do today.

The ascent of these symbols onto the national pantheon preoccupies O'Leary in her next two chapters. The state played only a modest role in this story. Rather, private actors in civil society spearheaded the patriotic effort. Foremost among these was the Grand Army of the Republic. Formed after the Civil War as a patriotic society for Union veterans, it became a mass movement only during the 1880s. The GAR's founding was followed by a parallel confederate organization, the United Confederate Veterans (UCV), which undertook many of the same activities in the South as the GAR did in the northern and federal arenas. Care of war graves, support for war widows, and civil war commemoration were initial activities. As membership reached into the hundreds of thousands, these activities broadened to encompass patriotic parades and national monuments, school curriculum content, federal and state public policy, and other aspects of American, including Southern, nationalism.

The Women's Relief Corps (WRC) played an analogous role to the GAR in the life of the nation, as did their southern mirror organization, the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC). Here, O'Leary examines the way in which gender roles fluctuated and how they found avenues into the predominantly male discourse of American nationalism. Surprisingly, O'Leary finds that the patriotic movement was actually more open than might be supposed. The women of the WRC were able to support women's suffrage and take their place among the vanguard of the Americanization movement, despite initial opposition from the GAR. Both organizations also kept their ranks open to Afro-Americans in the face of challenges from the small wing of White Union patriots resident in the South.

Yet there were limits to the flexibility of American nationalism. Patriotic mobilization and commemoration took pride of place while liberal and egalitarian considerations generally retreated into the background. In the chapters to follow, O'Leary recounts how themes of

sectional reconciliation predominated after 1880, as symbolized in “Blue-Gray” veterans’ reunions. Radical reconstruction, in the form of Black equality and civil liberty, took a back seat to sectional reconciliation and national unity amidst the dramas of the Indian and Spanish-American conflicts. The Emancipation Proclamation and Slavery issue were thereby airbrushed from the nation’s collective memory of the Civil War. As the author suggests, “It would not be an overstatement to conclude that the white South won in the cultural arena what it had lost on the battlefield.” (p. 203)

As we move into the twentieth century, the book considers the rise of the Wilsonian Democrats, with their unreconstructed Southern outlook and support base. This alignment helped to legitimize Jim Crow legislation in the South and tacitly support vigilante violence against southern Blacks. Meanwhile, 100 Per Cent Americanism reigned in the North, where the target groups often included European immigrants and socialists. On this note, O’Leary writes that the GAR and WRC played key roles in institutionalizing American nationalism in the public schools, notably in urban immigrant districts. With the support of federal and state governments and their bureaucrats, the Pledge of Allegiance and the flying of the flag became standard practices across the nation. Flag desecration laws also made headway thanks to these organizations. Nevertheless, the patriotic spirit did not wholly silence marginal voices. Blacks, in particular, upheld their version of Americanism by celebrating the Emancipation Proclamation and criticizing their exclusion from mainstream celebrations. They had fought and died for the nation, and determined to make it live up to its ideals.

This capable book could be improved in several respects. The case that American identity was local prior to the success of the patriotic movement in the early twentieth century remains asserted but unproven. A preference for souvenirs over monuments and differences of July

Fourth celebration, for example, do not provide much of a window into the “localistic” psyche. Just as fatal is the tendency to impose a modern “liberal-conservative” ideological grid onto the complex and shifting cultural realities of this period. Racist, nativist, male chauvinist, imperialist, and anti-Leftist fragments rarely lined up with one another in the neat fashion observed here. Most egalitarian social reformers and labour leaders (notably Samuel Gompers) favoured immigration restriction, while pro-imperialist, anti-Leftist businessmen and their allies, such as President Taft, opposed them. Meanwhile, the Democratic alignment united Southern Whites and Northern proletarian immigrants against northern WASP nativists and their Black allies. Feminists found a better reception in the dry, nativist Republican party than they did in the wet, racist Democratic camp. The failure to note these complexities leads to slippery claims. Did Northerners really push for reconciliation because of a sense of shared racial brotherhood with White Southerners? No convincing evidence of this thesis ever appears.

Despite these shortcomings, it is important to recognize that the core of the book, namely the work on the GAR and WRC, acknowledges the complex cross-cutting politics of the 1865-1918 period and will stand as an important contribution to scholarship. The attention to detail when describing patriotic mobilization and its intersection with the educational and political process is exemplary. Overall, the book presents a coherent narrative and is recommended to students of American history and nationalist politics alike.

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