

The Battle of New Orleans in History and Memory [book review]

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Abstract:

Book review of: *The Battle of New Orleans in History and Memory*. Laura Lyons McLemore, ed. Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2016. ISBN 978-0-8071-6465-5 (Hardback). \$38.00. 232 p.

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Article:

The Battle of New Orleans in History and Memory. Laura Lyons McLemore, ed. Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2016. ISBN 978-0-8071-6465-5 (Hardback). \$38.00. 232 p.

During a period when many historians are rethinking the legacy of Andrew Jackson, *The Battle of New Orleans in History and Memory* seems particularly timely. Editor Laura Lyons McLemore has assembled nine essays by notable historians which were originally presented at a 2014 symposium held to commemorate the bicentennial of the Battle of New Orleans. The collected works tell the story of the War of 1812 from different perspectives, separating fact from fable concerning this pivotal conflict and the men who shaped its outcome.

The Battle of New Orleans was an important victory for a fledgling nation that had only recently won independence from Britain. In the years after the Revolutionary War, the British continually harassed the United States by restricting their trade with Europe, menacing American ships and pressing their sailors into British service, and encouraging Native Americans to attack settlers in the West. The United States finally declared war against Britain in June of 1812, and their victory at the Battle of New Orleans in January of 1815 ultimately served to increase nationalism and confirm a true American identity.

McLemore's introduction clearly establishes the factors leading to the War of 1812 and the resulting narrative that emerged from America's "glorious victory." This initial discussion

contextualizes the chapters that follow, which cover topics such as the role of African Americans and Creoles in the war, the international perspective of the conflict, the commemorative events surrounding the Centennial, and the shaping of the mythic figure of Andrew Jackson. McLemore chooses Donald R. Hickey's aptly titled chapter, "'What We Know That Ain't So:' Myths of the War of 1812," to explore persistent misconceptions and myths surrounding the war which gradually became part of America's collective memory. Hickey sites historical narratives, such as the importance of the Kentucky Rifle, the potential fate of Louisiana if the battle had been lost, and the possibility of a Canadian invasion, that became muddled and embellished over time, resulting in a mythology that has proven long-lasting.

In the years leading to the Centennial of the Battle of New Orleans, the growing romantic narrative was enthusiastically perpetuated by patriotic organizations such as the United Daughters of 1812. In his chapter "One Hundred Years of Old Hickory and Cotton Bales: The Battle of New Orleans Centennial Celebration," Joseph F. Stoltz traces the rise of women's organizations in the late 19th century and their role in shaping the collective historical memory of the country. Understandably, the New Orleans branch of the Daughters of 1812 grew rapidly in the years preceding the Centennial, due in large part to their commitment to build a monument commemorating the Battle of New Orleans. Yet, upon completing the impressive Chalmette Monument, the Daughters faced challenges such as pushback from local industry, a lack of funds, and the site's difficult tourist access. Other memorials to the War of 1812 were also encountering difficulties, even ones planned in Jackson's home state of Tennessee. Ultimately, it fell to the Ladies Hermitage Association (LHA) to solidify their state's hero, Andrew Jackson, in popular memory. This was done not only through monuments, but also by controlling the narrative of the Battle of New Orleans in the minds of future generations. Stoltz recounts the efforts of the LHA to direct the narrative in school textbooks, and through events such as organized children's essay contests, thereby securing the hold of Jackson and his victory in the public's imagination and memory.

One of the more entertaining chapters of the book features the war through a musical lens. "The Battle of New Orleans in Popular Music and Culture," by Tracey E. W. Laird, explores songs that were actually written during the War of 1812, as well as ones that continued to tell the story well over a century after the fact. Laird begins by dissecting Johnny Horton's popular song, "The Battle of New Orleans." Based on words written by Jimmy Driftwood, an Arkansas school principal in 1936, with music based on the tune "Eighth of January," this catchy song rose to number 1 on the Billboard charts for the year 1959. The comedic lyrics tell the story of the conflict from an American soldier's point of view, and reflect the continuing mythology of the battle. The author then discusses important national songs actually written during the war years, namely, "Hail to the Chief" and "The Star-Spangled Banner." Music, plays, poetry, and art helped perpetuate the memory of the war and the heroism of Andrew Jackson. Laird believes that this might be due to the dramatic and colorful accounts that emerged from the Battle of New Orleans. Stories that built the mythology of an outnumbered heroic band of American soldier toting Kentucky rifles soundly trouncing the British army in the exotic Louisiana swamps served as a solid platform to build a popular collective narrative. Andrew Jackson was lionized as a strategic genius and man of the people. Of course, the modern view of Andrew Jackson has pivoted in the collective memory, and the author uses the musical *Bloody, Bloody Andrew Jackson* as an illustration of how it has been adapted into popular culture.

The scholarly essays that comprise *The Battle of New Orleans in History and Memory* encourage the reader to consider the true significance of the War of 1812, its heroes, and its place within the country's collective memory. The range of topics included within the book will definitely hold the interest of both historians and students of American history, and provide valuable perspectives on how generations have shaped the memory and mythology of a politically and economically complicated war.

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