

Sentinel Songs: Monuments, Poetry, and the Lost Cause Narrative in Collective Memory

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Abstract

Over the past few years, Confederate monuments have become a regular and controversial topic in American discourse. To explore the historical and cultural contexts of these contentious monuments, this paper examines primary source material spanning approximately seventy-five years in the postbellum American South. With poetry possessing a far more ubiquitous presence in the 19th-century American public sphere, analysis of patterns in poetic discourse reveals larger contextual evidence about the monuments and the culture that erected and dedicated them. By tracing patterns in both the poetry and ceremonial rhetoric of monuments and monument dedications across the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I employ Halbwach's collective memory theory to understand contemporary monument sentiments. Within the theoretical framework of collective memory, poetry, rather than serving a purely artistic social function, acts also as a "memory carrier" that transmits collective traumas and ideologies to future generations. Consequently, the ritual of monument memorialization seems to have preserved the mythos of the Confederate Lost Cause among Southern whites to the present day.

Across the contemporary American South, many thousands of aging Confederate Civil War monuments continue to dot the Southern landscape. Once unveiled before grandiose, ceremonial audiences, these monuments—from the familiar “common soldier” standing atop stone pillars to bronze castings of stoic generals on horseback—gradually became a soamewhat ordinary characteristic of Southern cities and towns (O’Connell 9). Recently, however, they have soared into the forefront of American political discourse, igniting fervent debate about their place in the public sphere. Split along radically opposed ideological lines, arguments for and against the monuments’ place in public spaces suggest either that their removal constitutes a form of cultural erasure, that they belong in museums where they can be contextualized, or that they should be altogether destroyed (Barker 125).

With the proposed removal of Confederate monuments still engendering resistance among many Southern whites, scholars may seek to understand how the “Lost Cause” still influences Southern identities. Contesting how the Civil War should be remembered, the “Lost Cause” narrative articulates a Southern-centric notion of the war, arguing, for example, that states’ rights—as opposed to the issue of slavery—was the primary cause of the conflict (Janney 40). French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs’ theory of collective memory argues that memory, more than a strictly individual experience, functions as a “reconstructive social framework to ensure the continuity of collectivity” (Kreiser 510). By examining monument memorialization through a collective memory framework and studying the discourses surrounding monument, dedications, and memorial groups like the Ladies Memorial Associations (LMAs), this article argues that poetry acted as a crucial memory-making tool in the formation of the Lost Cause narrative.

In the immediate years following Confederate surrender, poetry fulfilled an urgent need for mourning Southerners: memorializing their dead. Abram J. Ryan—“the Poet-Priest of the Lost Cause” (Sedore 9)—published “Sentinel Songs” in May of 1867, ostensibly concerned about “the fact that in a few places and a for a short period of time, Federal authorities had forbidden the erection of monuments to the Confederate war dead” (O’Connell 70-71). “Sentinel Songs” assigns a moral duty to poets and their craft:

When falls the soldier brave
Dead—at the feet of wrong,—

The poet sings, and guards his grave
With sentinels of song (Another Gem).

Without the legal right to construct monuments, poetry itself would have to take up the task of defending the burial sites of fallen soldiers.

Federal authorities eventually lifted the ban on monument construction, but “Sentinel Songs” would continue to appear in monument discourses. Alluding to its final and most prolific stanza, Father H. A. Picheret offered a prayer for the dedication of a monument to Jefferson Davis in Jackson, Mississippi: “But if, in the course of the ages, the all-destroying hand of time should cause it to crumble into dust, grant, O Lord, that the remembrance of the knightly deeds of our Confederate heroes may never die out in the generous hearts of the Southern people” (Confederate Dead of Mississippi 297). Mrs. Luther Manship would later in the ceremony recite the final stanza in front of “more than twenty thousand” attendees:

When marble wears away,
And monuments are dust,—
The songs that guard our soldiers’ clay
Will still fulfill their trust (Confederate Dead of Mississippi 313).

Inscribed on numerous Confederate monuments, the final stanza of “Sentinel Songs” suggests that poems possessed the capacity to preserve soldiers’ memory more permanently than could any monuments. Ryan, himself a living sentinel of the Lost Cause, traveled and published extensively throughout the South until his death in 1884 (O’Connell 189). Meanwhile, when Ryan was crafting postwar poetry and local LMA chapters had set to work with the pragmatic concerns of interring Confederate soldiers, a Kentucky veteran’s ode to Mexican-American War dead had been redeployed for a new task. In May of 1866, Theodore O’Hara’s “Bivouac of the Dead”—written a decade before the outset of the Civil War—found a role in dedicating the Resaca Confederate Cemetery in Georgia. An 1867 article in the Macon Weekly Telegraph recounted the local ladies’ efforts and concluded with stanzas from O’Hara’s somber elegy:

Rest on, embalmed and sainted dead!
 Dear as the blood ye gave;
 No impious footstep here shall tread
 The herbage of your grave;
 Nor shall your glory be forgot
 While Fame her record keeps,
 Or Honor points the hallowed spot
 Where Valor proudly sleeps
 (Confederate Dead at Resaca 4).

O'Hara's diction, in keeping with the traditions of commemorative war poetry, paints a deeply religious portrait of the fallen soldier—the "sainted dead" cannot be besmirched by the "impious footstep," nor forgotten while "fame her record keeps." "Bivouac of the Dead" captures a familiar and non-sectarian reverence for military dead, and because it did not express the animosity coded into other postwar Southern poems, "the Federal Government was to place [the poem] over the gateway to the Federal Cemetery at Arlington and still later to use in all the cemeteries of Federal soldiers throughout the land" (Coulter 58).

To understand the cultural significance of "Bivouac of the Dead," one must visualize the massive audiences attending monument dedications—"Crowds estimated in the hundreds of thousands . . . the largest peacetime assemblies to this day"—hearing passages of the poem recited by Confederate politicians and veterans as famous as contemporary celebrities (Sedore 9). Captain Gordon McCabe, a regular speaker at dedications, read poetry at more than a few monument ceremonies; he recited passages from "Bivouac of the Dead" at the Pegram Battalion Association's 1886 reunion "to great praise and reverie" (Annual Reunion 23). And, after the extravagant ceremonies had concluded, monuments bearing inscriptions of the poem would transmit O'Hara's poetic sentiment to many future visitors. In *An Illustrated Guide to Virginia's Confederate Monuments*, Timothy Sedore describes the public relationship with war monuments: "There was something worshipful, exalting, and ultimately quasi-religious about the [monument] movement . . . in the soldier there is something of the American Eucharist: the ceremony of dedication was a veritable anointing, a bonding of the past with the present" (Sedore 10). At this site of bonding, both the poem and the stone upon which it is inscribed act as a "memory carrier . . . through

which the chaos of social activities can be changed into a story . . . a kind of meta-narrative, rooted in the myths and archetypal images of a particular culture" (Kalinowska 427). Where Ryan sought to place sentiments over the graves of Confederate soldiers, O'Hara elevated their memory to a romantic, idealistic realm—an archive in a collective consciousness where only the venerable qualities of their cause remained.

However, although Confederate monuments mostly bear inscriptions of Ryan's and O'Hara's poems, Albert D. Oliphant of the *Charleston News & Courier* suggested in 1910 that "[p]reminently the greatest poetess of the war was Margaret Junkin Preston" (Oliphant 16). Preston's war poetry—like Ryan's and O'Hara's—dealt in notions of eternal martial glory, but her 1866 *Beechenbrook: A Rhyme of War* also conveyed a more notable contempt for the North:

The largess of their praise is flung
 With bounty, rare and regal;
 —Is it because the vulture fears
 No longer the dead eagle? (Preston 55).

Preston's "rather invidious comparison of the vulture and eagle" may have been considered inappropriate by the "military rule and carpet-bag governments . . . still prevailing over the South" (Tardy 380; Address of Gen. R. E. Colston 36). Nonetheless, the 1866 edition of *Beechenbrook* achieved wide distribution: "We see no reason to doubt the entire veracity of Messrs. Kelly & Piet in announcing 'fifth thousand' on the title-page of this volume" (Tardy 381). Like the Ladies Memorial Associations that had formed across the South in the immediate aftermath of surrender, *Beechenbrook* avoided censorship because, according to Caroline Janney:

[W]omen might be best suited to take the lead in memorializing the South's Lost Cause. After all, if women were not political, then their actions could not be construed as treasonous to the U.S. government. Middle- and upper-class women of the LMAs thus served in the forefront of the postwar battle over Confederate memory, simultaneously allowing men to skirt the issue of treason and inaugurating the traditions of the Lost Cause as early as 1865 and 1866 (Janney 40).

Beechenbrook—"which, we should judge, would be immensely popular among the people for whom it was written"—could both "touch the hearts of thousands of readers" dealing with the immediate sociopolitical consequences of Southern surrender and "stir in their hearts that bitterness of hatred and that stubbornness of rebellion which did so much to prolong the late conflict" (Tardy 381; Oliphant 17; Tardy 381).

Preston's poetry also makes important assertions about the sanctity of monument space. "Stonewall Jackson's Grave"—"one of her best war poems"—eulogizes the famous Southern general (her brother-in-law), next to whom she is buried today in Stonewall Jackson Memorial Cemetery (Oliphant 17). Confederate General Raleigh E. Colston was elected to recite the following final stanza for his 1870 address before the LMA in Wilmington, North Carolina:

Rare fame! rare name!—If chanted praise,
With all the world to listen,—
If pride that swells a nation's soul,—
If foemen's tears that glisten,—
If pilgrims' shrining love,—if grief
Which naught may soothe or sever,—
If THESE can consecrate,—this spot
Is sacred ground forever! (Address of Gen. R. E. Colston 50).

Preston, like O'Hara and Ryan, attributes an eternal, spiritual significance to burial (and, by extension, memorial) space. Although her prominence had begun to fade by the time Oliphant was writing about her in 1910, Preston's assertion that the "spot is sacred ground forever" would have penetrated deeply into the collective consciousness of a Southern culture living under military occupation (Oliphant 17). Consequently, one can begin to see how "narratives of collective memory, which refer to the collective traumas of the past . . . act as contextual frameworks for group identity in the present" and why threatened identities might staunchly oppose the removal of monuments occupying space once deemed to be "sacred" (Kalinowska 426).

As time passed since the end of the war, the animosity reflected in Preston's work did not remain a core component of the Lost Cause narrative. In 1870, Confederate General Raleigh E. Colston lamented

during an address to the Wilmington, North Carolina LMA that although "our own immediate sons and daughters will not believe [Northern] falsifications of history . . . perchance their children or grandchildren will believe them" (Address of Gen. R. E. Colston 38). Twenty-three years later, however, General Colston wrote a conciliatory preliminary note for the Southern Historical Society Papers' account of his 1870 Wilmington address:

We had already appreciated the value of the Northern soldiers, and we now understand the motives which had impelled them to war from their point of view, motives just as honest, patriotic, and noble as ours. Prejudices on both sides have melted away, and there are now no better friends than those who fought each other in the blue and gray (Address of Gen. R. E. Colston 36).

Colston points to a shift in the Southern collective memory toward valuing a soldierly camaraderie that transcended sectional lines. This sentiment would be echoed in the works of later Southern poets who continued to shape the Southern public consciousness. When the most venerated of Confederate historical figures, General Robert E. Lee, passed away in 1870, the Virginia Ladies' and Lee Monument Associations both spearheaded statewide efforts to construct a monument to the late Confederate commander in the state capitol, Richmond (Monument to Lee 188-190). The Southern Historical Society Papers chronicled the monument's construction and dedication process in nearly two-hundred-page account: *The Monument to General Lee*. Planning and organization efforts spanned three decades and covered both logistical challenges—finding the right sculptor and designating the appropriate site—and stylistic choices, such as commissioning a poet who could handle the task of commemorating a military commander remembered as "a father rather than a leader" (Monument to Lee 187). James Barron Hope, a widely-celebrated poet whose work had been commissioned decades earlier to dedicate a Virginia monument to George Washington, had been "summoned once more to celebrate in song the deeds and virtues of Virginia's greatest son of her second Revolution, the peer of Washington in military genius, patriotism, constancy and valor" (Monument to Lee 209). Hope died just days before the ceremony, having finished "*Memoriae Sacrum*" on his deathbed

(Monument to Lee 209). Because the late Hope could not read it himself, Captain McCabe, “a gallant soldier, an accomplished scholar, a poet of no mean abilities himself, and the intimate personal friend of Hope . . . was recognized by all as the man for the occasion” (Monument to Lee 209). McCabe read the poem in its entirety—all two-hundred-and-fifty-two lines—his recitation “frequently interrupted with applause” (Monument to Lee 213).

“*Memoriae Sacrum*”—sacred memory—at once conveys a softening of sectional resentments, an argument for the truth inherent in the Southern cause, and an effort to vindicate “the [Virginian] social order / which gave us men as great as [Washington and Lee]” (Monument to Lee 211). The poem’s voice embodies a “we” that speaks on behalf of the (white) Southern population:

Peace had come. God Gave his blessing
On the fact and on the name!
The South speaks no invective,
And she writes no word of blame;
But we call all men to witness
That we stand up without shame!
(Monument to Lee 216).

While Colston, in 1870, had expressed his anxiety over the future remembrance of the Confederate cause, Hope’s collective speaker assuages Colston’s fear with broad assertions about the destiny of “truth” in the course of history:

God and our consciences alone
Give us measures of right and wrong.
The race may fall unto the swift
And the battle to the strong;
But the truth will shine in history
And blossom into song (Monument to Lee 216).

If one sentiment runs common among the vast breadth of poetry and speeches written and read for monument dedication audiences, it is unquestionably the notion that with the passage of time, history would reveal the “truth” undergirding the “Lost Cause” for which the Confederate South fought. Hope’s appeal to a changeless truth recalls Ryan’s plead of the poetic sentinel: guard the memory of the Confederate dead against the erosion of time.

But sentinels of memorialization cannot defy the reconstructive nature of collective memory. “*Memoriae Sacrum*” reveals an interesting reconstruction: a veneration of the figural Confederate rebel. In the earlier years of the Reconstruction era, Confederate discourses renounced the label of rebel. Just a few years prior to McCabe’s recitation of “*Memoriae Sacrum*,” General Bradley T. Johnson “made a defence [sic] of Confederates from the charge of being ‘Rebels’ and ‘traitors’ well worthy of preservation in [The Southern Historical Society’s] records” (Maryland Confederate Monument 429). Johnson argued for the Confederacy’s right to secession, the legal implication of which being that the Civil War would instead be a war fought between sovereign nations and not a rebellion. He also stressed that insurrection against the Union could carry the legal consequences of treason for every complicit Confederate soldier. To Johnson, the legacy of rebellion damaged Southern veterans’ reputations, and he worried that future generations of Southerners would remember their fathers as “felons who vainly attempted to destroy the Union” (Maryland Confederate Monument 430).

In “*Memoriae Sacrum*,” however, Hope reminds his audience of America’s first “rebel”—George Washington. Hope’s comparison of Lee and Washington effectively links an ideological “right to revolution,” the ideology which impelled America’s founders to rebellion, with the Confederacy’s perceived duty to overthrow a “tyrannical” Northern government—a duty cemented still as a central tenet of the Lost Cause narrative (Barker):

These two shall ride immortal
And shall ride abreast of Time;
Shall light up stately history
And blaze in Epic Rhyme—
Both Patriots, both Virginians true,
Both “rebels,” both sublime
(Monument to Lee 215).

Whether Hope chose to enclose “rebels” in quotation marks or the Southern Historical Society Papers recorded McCabe’s inflection of the word signals regardless that acceptance of the title had not permeated Southern culture at the time. Johnson may have been surprised that future generations of Southerners would remember the Confederate Rebel with fondness

rather than disdain.

With Reconstruction coming to a close and the Southern economy achieving relative stability near the turn of the twentieth century, a new generation of women's organizations, such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy, oversaw a rapidly accelerating pace of monument construction throughout the South (Winberry 26). The Southern public, it seems, had not shown any signs of forgetfulness half a century after the end of the war. Confederate Veteran, an immensely popular publication that circulated in the South from 1895 to 1932, articulated the "Myth of the Lost Cause" in prose and poetry for many readers born after surrender in 1865. The first issue contained Ryan's most popular poem, "The Conquered Banner" (King Evans 239). Moreover, the magazine served as "the official organ first of the United Confederate Veterans and later of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the Sons of Confederate Veterans, and the Confederate Southern Memorial Society" (King Evans 240). With an organized network of memorial and veterans' associations, a central literary hub for promoting events and disseminating Lost Cause rhetoric, and a healthier southern economy, social conditions were ripe for monument construction. And, with new monuments came new dedications—and a new generation of poets to dedicate them.

A Charlottesville native and Virginia State Senator, James Lindsay Gordon, was born in 1860; he was a child of five when Lee surrendered at Appomattox ("Ballad of the Sunlit Years"). "[D]istinguished for his eloquence as a political and forensic speaker," his poetry reached Southern audiences at monument ceremonies, although he only published Ballads of the Sunlit Years (a compilation of his poetry) at the very end of his life in 1904 ("Ballad of the Sunlit Years"). A 1904 edition of Confederate Veteran featured Gordon's "An Unknown Confederate," a short, four-line poem:

"Jim —, of Biloxi." That is all.
It is graven into the granite wall
Where the monument rises fair
Into the soft Virginian air (Confederate Veteran 426).

Gordon's speaker refers to an already-constructed monument, suggesting that a culture of the monuments themselves had already begun to manifest throughout the South.

In 1890, at the dedication of the Fairfax County courthouse monument in Virginia, Gordon read a poem he had composed for the ceremony. With an ethereal tone reminiscent of Hope's "Memoriae Sacrum," the dedication expressed a faith in a romanticized concept of history:

As long as valor and faith on earth are cherished,
And men shall honor the brave
Bright will grow the story of those who perished
For a cause they could not save,
Till on history's changeless page serene and glorious,
While the spirit of truth find breath,
Their deeds will glow through the eons of time,
victorious
Over defeat and death (Fairfax Monument 127).

Gordon, like Hope, asserts a "changeless" nature of history—an idealistic conception that truth and history are one-and-the-same. However, within the theoretical framework of collective memory, history, like an individual's memory, conforms to other externalities than an objective historical record; history itself emerges from a constant process of narrative reinforcement and reconstruction. Colston feared the influence of a Northern historical narrative, and Johnson worried that future Southerners would remember the Confederate cause with shame. However, in spite of the fears expressed in the speeches of Confederate military personalities, the narrative of the Lost Cause seemed to cement itself only more firmly in Southern memory with every new monument built.

Charlottesville, Virginia (Gordon's hometown), is also home to a monument of Robert E. Lee dedicated in 1924—ninety-three years prior to the "Unite the Right" rally that commanded America's public attention in August of 2017 (Fausset and Feuer). John S. Patton published a comprehensive account of the monument's history and ceremony proceedings for the Albemarle Charlottesville Historical Society the same year. As per usual among monument dedications, events included parades, speeches, and poetry recitations. Many of the addresses given focused on contested histories about the war. It was Colston who had predicted in 1870 that "[our] descendants will see these slanders in Northern and probably in European publications—perhaps even in the very text-books of their schools (for unfortunately we Southerners

write too little)” (Address of Gen. R. E. Colston 41). W. McDonald Lee, the Commander-in-Chief of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, echoed Colston’s worry almost fifty-five years later:

The South is truly deficient in advertisement. Ah, that is the trouble with us—the lack of written history. We would not discount others, but others are not doing the South justice. Some twenty years ago, Judge Moffett, of Roanoke, and myself, working on the History Committee of the Sons of Veterans, found Elson’s history used in practically every school in Virginia. I cannot tell you because of the ladies present what abominable stuff was in that history, in such horrible terms that you would not wish your twenty-year-old boy to read (Patton 41).

Clearly, however, Southerners born after the war, like Don P. Halsey of Lynchburg, had not been swayed by Elson’s history books. Speaking in front of the dedication audience, Halsey proclaimed that “I am one of the generation born after the war, but the son of a man whose proudest boast was that he was a soldier of the South, and I would not exchange that heritage for all the gold and silver piled up in the treasury vaults” (Patton 20). With monument construction continuing throughout the South well into the mid-twentieth century, dedication and rededication ceremonies created recurring sites of poetic memorialization’s discursive impact on Southern communities (Sedore 10). And with thousands of monuments occupying public space throughout the South, the permanence of poetic discourses etched into the very stone and bronze of the monuments themselves would ensure that memorial poetry’s rhetorical power would continue to act on the collective Southern memory.

As such, with a deeply-rooted culture of Confederate memorialization firmly implanted in (white) Southern collective memory, one can begin to imagine why proposed monument removals might generate anxieties among communities programmed by a Lost Cause collectivity. After all, poetry and monument memorialization had not only implored Southerners to remember; it had also bemoaned the day that they might forget. The most commonly referenced poem among those inscribed on Confederate monuments is Rudyard Kipling’s “Recessional”:

God of our fathers, known of old,
Lord of our far-flung battle-line,

Beneath whose awful Hand we hold
Dominion over palm and pine—
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget—lest we forget! (Sedore 18).

Although Kipling published “Recessional” for a British audience, the poem’s connection of religion and memory made it transposable to a Southern context. Kipling’s speaker prays that a collective “we” not forget a memory bound to a cultural narrative such as the Lost Cause. The cautionary rhetorical force of “Recessional” and its immense popularity in monument discourses undoubtedly influenced Southern memory. Indeed, today, self-identifying Southerners still disproportionately support praise of Confederate leaders in public discourse, assert that the war was fought over states’ rights, and feel a positive or neutral reaction to the Confederate battle flag (Civil War at 150). Although many Southerners denounce the white nationalists who perpetrated violence at the Charlottesville protests in 2017, deconstructing a collective narrative with a century-and-a-half of cultural imprinting will certainly require more than the removal of monuments to a Lost Cause not quite yet forgotten. In addition, those who work toward the end of white supremacist ideals embodied by Confederate monuments should investigate and understand the power of poetic rhetoric and its action on collective memory to more completely rewrite their place in American society.

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