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*The Civil War Dead and American Modernity* by Ian Finseth,  
and: *Remembering World War I in America* by Kimberly J.  
Licursi (review)

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students of London and of American literature. *Jack London* wraps up with a “Coda: Literary Legacy and Scholarship,” which presents a comprehensive overview of book-length scholarly publications, archival repositories, and online resources.

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*The Civil War Dead and American Modernity.* By Ian Finseth. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2018. 296 pp. Cloth, \$65.00.

*Remembering World War I in America.* By Kimberly J. Licursi. Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2018. xxiii + 294 pp. Cloth, \$55.00.

Between their separate remits, Finseth’s and Licursi’s studies span America’s cultural reception of the Civil War and World War I, ranging in the scope of their commentary from the 1860s to the 1940s. Coming from adjacent centuries, fought in very different ways, these conflicts are also distinguished by the disparity of cultural prestige they have garnered in American collective consciousness. While the Civil War may have amassed greater gravitas and attention, Finseth’s and Licursi’s works clarify that each conflict was caught up in the same evolving trajectory of American modernity, with its concomitant effects on the media employed to shape perceptions of warfare.

For Finseth, the Civil War dead “are endlessly reinscribed” through diverse and complex modes of commemoration, involving teleological assertions of national identity, increasing secularization, and awareness of the “essentially mediated character of all existence.” Licursi, meanwhile, discusses a range of print and film sources and contends that Americans never formed a cohesive ideological response to the war “as they would about World War II and the Civil War,” concluding that the war’s cultural reverberations were ultimately of an attenuated, nebulous form.

Each work investigates four vectors of memory. Finseth examines modernity’s influence on perceptions of the Civil War, before moving on to images, history, and fiction. He argues that individual subjective interpretation of the conflict parallels, in microcosm, larger cultural mediations, and offers Freudian melancholia as an analogy to understand profound, yet still unassimilated emotional attachment to the war. Finseth’s most compelling argument is in regard to Civil War photography. He challenges the scholarly truism that photographic verisimilitude shattered Victorian concepts

of heroism and grieving, and demonstrates the paucity of documentary evidence which supports this widespread contention. For Finseth, the visual ubiquity of violence in American society from World War II onward has enhanced engagement with Civil War photography. In his reading, feelings of continuity with the Civil War are not only a legacy of the past but are retrospectively activated and strengthened by modern media.

Developing his ruminations on trauma and memory, Finseth suggests methodologies adopted by Civil War historians who either successfully narrativize grief (thereby neutralizing traumatic legacy) or, alternatively, built a new myth wherein the trauma of loss becomes the basis of new identity. Fiction, he contends, reflects the shift from romance, a genre fitted to antebellum strategies of meaning and the ideal of the individual's sacrifice for the collective, to realism, a mode more suited to the modern, secular world, though one with less consolatory possibility. Discussing this broad evolution in relation to Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Edward Bellamy, John W. De Forest, and Ambrose Bierce, Finseth explores the ways they negotiate determinism, impersonal death, and traditional ideals of heroism.

Finseth, who has a long track record of high-quality publications in Civil War and American slave narratives, writes with assurance and confidently draws on an impressive array of critical and primary material. However, in its ambitious scope, *The Civil War Dead and American Modernity* feels at times diffuse and meditative. This is not helped by Finseth's unremittingly dense register which is permeated with references to cultural philosophy. Maintaining such an approach for nearly 250 pages may be a matter of personal taste. However, there is a good deal of performative academic writing here, which even Finseth tacitly acknowledges with frequent phrases such as "by which I mean," "in other words," and "to be more explicit." A less encumbered prose style could have been favored with no damage to—indeed, could only serve to amplify—Finseth's otherwise engaging arguments.

In *Remembering World War I in America*, Licursi examines state histories, memoirs, fiction, and film. We learn that, despite concentrated effort by historical societies, of the 35 states who attempted to compile memorial volumes only seven (and the then-territory of Hawaii) succeeded. The majority of veterans, Licursi demonstrates, had little or no interest in contributing information to state historical societies, a disinclination she sees expressive of "a pervasive apathy, if not disdain, for war remembrance in postwar America." In her second chapter, Licursi discusses the five hundred or so memoirs written by Americans between 1914 and 1941. Interest in such works peaked between 1917–18, with some examples, notably Arthur Guy Empey's *Over the Top* (1917), becoming bestsellers. Yet as Licursi demonstrates, few reached a second printing and interest in war memoirs fell off dramatically after 1919.

War novels, Licursi informs the reader, found a more receptive audience, but the output of American writers failed to reach a consensus as to the war's meaning and never came close to reaching the levels of interest excited by the fiction of Zane Grey and Sinclair Lewis. In contrast, Licursi notes, pulp fiction was vastly popular, with at least forty-eight separate World War I-related periodicals appearing from the 1920s to the 1940s. Compellingly, she demonstrates the importance of this long-overlooked area of war remembrance, arguing that the patriotic, war-as-adventure nature of pulp magazines is more representative of American reaction to the war than the so-called "lost generation" paradigm. Closing with a discussion of the hundreds of war films made by Hollywood, Licursi concludes that these are too drawn between realism and the imperatives of Hollywood plotlines to convey a "clear message" about the war or to generate an iconic cinematic account of the American experience.

*Remembering World War I in America* is most impressive in Licursi's extensive archival research on state histories and her investigations into the factual data of publishing figures. This volume is, however, compromised by dissonances in her analysis. Licursi's central contention is that because a national myth did not form around World War I—like the so-called "Good War" of World War II—that "pervasive apathy . . . characterized American attitudes toward the war." This, however, contradicts much of what her research demonstrates, in that there were various constituencies of—often very active—cultural production related to the war: middle-brow novels and memoirs, pulp fiction, high-brow literature, and multiple Hollywood films. This polyvocality, however, does not mean that the American response equates to indifference but that American attitudes were far-ranging, dissonant, and found expression in various cultural media. Though more careful analysis would have strengthened her book, Licursi's important empirical data and accessible style will make a valuable contribution to American World War I studies.

Comparing Finseth's and Licursi's monographs, it can be seen that the Civil War and World War I exist on a continuum of cultural mediation, on which developments in representative media continually renegotiate perceptions of America's major wars. That continuum also, however, includes scholarly assessments and their methodological and stylistic predilection. One of the monographs discussed here suffers from a surfeit of exegesis, the other from its dearth. The marked differences between Finseth's and Licursi's approaches serve as a reminder that modes of academic interpretation—as well as the cultural artifacts they address—have the potential to play a marked role in shaping perceptions of America's wars.

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