Memories of a Rooted Sorrow
The Legacy of the Guerrilla War

DANIEL E. SUTHERLAND

Historical memory and the role of memory in writing history have become popular themes in recent years. In Civil War studies, they have become a veritable subfield and used in a variety of ways. Some scholars compare postwar recollections to wartime accounts in order to clarify or correct the historical record. Other people try to show how faulty memories have caused misunderstandings about the purpose, conduct, or outcome of the war. Still others reveal how and why memories have been constructed for specific purposes, with events and motives selected and interpreted to satisfy the needs of particular people, groups, or communities. Sometimes these gaps between fact and memory originate with elderly people whose recollections have simply faded, or who never knew with certainty the where, when, or how of the events they described. Then again, some public figures publish reminiscences and memoirs intended to protect or embellish their own reputations, regardless of the facts. Sometimes these attempts to shape the past are successful. Later generations believe them, even in the face of contradictory evidence. As the editor of the Shinbone Star famously proclaimed in The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, “When the legend becomes the fact, print the legend.”

The efforts of former Confederate guerrillas to create legends, and so to influence how we remember their role in the war, have, until quite recently,

1. This essay is a much expanded and reconsidered version of the epilogue of my book American Civil War Guerrillas: Changing the Rules of Warfare (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2013), 99–110.
largely escaped historical inquiry. Even when writing about the guerrilla legacy, scholars have tended to rely on what other people said about it, rather than allowing the guerrillas to speak for themselves. This approach is understandable if one believes that ex-guerrillas were insincere in recounting their wartime deeds, but that leaves open the question of why they wrote and the ways in which they told their stories. No one writes without purpose, and so it behooves us to take their postwar testimonies seriously. This essay suggests that the postwar writings and actions of Confederate guerrillas were intended to rehabilitate an image that had been soiled by the type of war they fought and the bitter memories they had sown.²

Considering the broader historiography of the war, this seems an appropriate time to ask how Confederate guerrillas viewed themselves, for despite an impressive, and still growing, body of scholarly literature on the guerrilla conflict, some historians have been slow to acknowledge the scope and significance of its role. This is especially true of historians who promote the dominance of military history—by which is meant the role of conventional armies—in the Civil War narrative. None can gainsay the importance of


Fellman and Neely have attempted the sort of analysis of guerrilla writings offered here, but their work is limited to Missouri. The same is true of Hulbert’s forthcoming book, Irregular Recollections: Civil War and Guerrilla Memory in the Missouri–Kansas Borderlands (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press), which, while promising to be the most detailed survey yet of the guerrilla war as memory, also relies largely on reminiscences published in the twentieth century.
armies to the outcome of any war, but this narrow and somewhat defensive perspective misjudges the extent to which the guerrilla conflict dominated the lives of countless people, soldiers and civilians alike. For them, the real war was waged not on conventional battlefields but in their backyards, and it was a decisive force in both the conduct and outcome of the larger war.³

Equally discouraging is the failure of specialists in historical memory to consider the reminiscences of guerrillas in their accounts of the war. Traditionally, these scholars have explained how memories were fashioned to foster personal and sectional harmony between northern and southern whites. The postwar years, they say, witnessed a conscience program of reconciliation, a process of healing, of burying the ugliness and unwelcomed consequences of war for the sake of national unity and white racial solidarity. More recently, in a direct challenge to this positive view of postwar America, some historians have insisted that deep sectional animosities continued to fester, especially among Union and Confederate veterans.⁴


Either way, former guerrillas have gotten the short end of the historiographical stick, mainly because they do not fit neatly into the orthodox Civil War narrative. And no wonder. The fact is, they fought a different kind of war, and they knew it. By war’s end, “guerrillas” and “bushwhackers” had become synonymous in North and South with unwarranted cruelty and violence. The Federals had accused them of ignoring the rules of “civilized warfare,” and they had become so unpredictable, so indiscriminate in the violence and suffering they fostered, that even the majority of staunch Confederates had turned against them by 1865. If not absolutely loathing guerrillas, people surely wanted to forget about them.

Of course, they were not the only people with soiled reputations. Army deserters, for instance, also entered the postwar world under a cloud. While some of these men learned to ignore the whispers and sideways glances of neighbors, others felt pressured to leave their homes. Men accused of cowardice were equally reviled, although, more often than deserters, the innocent stuck up for themselves by publicly denying the slanders. In at least one instance, an entire regiment labored to refute the suggestion of cowardice under fire. At the other extreme, some proven and hardened Union veterans, far from being either deserters or cowards, defended violent, immoral, or just plain disgusting wartime behavior that would have shocked postwar civilians. Several soldiers, for example, in publishing accounts of William T. Sherman’s march through Georgia and the Carolinas, made light of the pillaging and bullying associated with those campaigns.5

Yet, ex-guerrillas carried an even heavier burden, partly because they remained in the public eye once the fighting ended. As Confederate armies surrendered in the spring and summer of 1865, some bands refused to follow suit. Whether from loyalty to their cause, fear of punishment, or a determination to resist a potentially oppressive military occupation, they posed a threat to law and order through the remainder of the year. This lingering cloud of potential violence was compounded when many discharged soldiers stole horses or food on their journeys homeward. People readily attributed the crimes to the “jayhawkers and freebooters” who had thrived on anarchy for

four years past, despite the fact that most guerrillas were perfectly willing to resume quiet lives.6

Ex-guerrillas also suffered in those early postwar months from an almost tangible desire, exacerbated by the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, to punish lawless behavior. Certainly Lincoln’s needless death did not help the prospects of Heinrich Wirz, former commandant of the Andersonville prison, who was executed in November 1865. But it is inaccurate to say, as is often done, that Wirz was the only Confederate executed for war crimes. Several rebel guerrillas awaiting trial or arrested after the armies had surrendered were hanged at about the same time as Wirz. Some imprisoned guerrillas, even if not slated for execution, had to serve whatever time remained on their sentences.7

As the spring of 1866 approached, army officers and Freedmen Bureau agents reported that ex-guerrillas were the men most likely to cause trouble, the ones least accepting of Confederate defeat. A Union general, describing conditions in Mississippi, told the Joint Committee on Reconstruction, “The worst class of people there are those who have been in the bands of guerrillas—the irregular bands of rebels.”8

Guilt by association damned them further in northern eyes when some southerners used violence to resist the rigors of Reconstruction. It is difficult to know how many members of such politically motivated paramilitary organizations as the Ku Klux Klan and Knights of the White Camellia had been wartime guerrillas. It seems likely, given the white South’s determination to oust the Reconstruction governments and suppress African Americans, that many men who had once criticized the wartime methods of irregulars temporarily adopted them. Yet, the violence and intimidation they employed in this new war of “blood redemption” could only remind northerners and southern unionists of a tainted legacy.9

Carpetbaggers, scalawags, armies of occupations, and politically empow-

7. Sutherland, Savage Conflict, 273, 275–76.
8. Quote from Marten, Sing Not War, 68–71.
ered freedmen aside, many of the local feuds that had unleashed the worst abuses of wartime violence continued with barely a pause. Contrary to later impressions that the guerrilla war had mostly pitted rebel irregulars against Union soldiers, the heart of the contest had always been a struggle between unionist and secessionist neighbors for political and economic control of their communities. Many of those battles were intensified by family or personal feuds rooted deep in the past. Rather than exhaust the contending parties, wartime violence only strengthened ancient animosities so that after the war, not a few people continued to settle old scores by familiar means, namely bushwhacking. Other people, hoping to restore the rule of law, urged military officials and civilian authorities to prosecute villains who had escaped wartime punishments. They wanted the miscreants behind bars, either to satisfy their sense of justice or to ensure their own protection against retaliation. Restitution might also take the form of hard cash, an alternative pursued even during the war in some places.10

Nor were former Union soldiers willing to let people forget the wartime suffering inflicted by rebels. True enough, as years and decades passed, and the golden stain of time softened bitter feelings between Union and Confederate soldiers, men of the rival armies often praised the courage and pluck of former foes. They held joint veterans’ reunions, dedicated military parks together, and wrote reminiscences intended as much to heal the sectional divide as to recount old battles and campaigns. Yet, as suggested above, these reunions were not always as amicable as tradition would have them, and in any event, the gatherings only accentuated the differences between regular soldiers and guerrillas, with the latter still despised by northerners as “thieves and murders by occupation, rebels by pretense, soldiers only in name, and cowards by nature.”11


Ex-guerrillas even had to contend with fellow Confederates who wanted to exclude them from written histories of the war. As self-righteous southerners erected the foundation of the “Lost Cause” and constructed a road to a “New South,” they were determined that no discordant elements should ruin their narrative. They wanted no reminders that murderous, plundering bands of cutthroats had once fought for the Confederacy, no more than they cared to dwell on the internal dissension and divisive community struggles that had generated some of the worst violence. Nothing could be allowed to undermine or tarnish the image of a noble and united wartime effort on behalf of southern independence.12

None of this boded well for old bushwhackers. “From the mass of rubbish that has been written about the guerrilla, there is little surprise that the popular conception of him should be a fiendish, bloodthirsty wretch,” wrote one of the brotherhood as late as 1903. And it was in response to such “rubbish” that this man and many of his comrades felt compelled to forge a nobler wartime legacy. Long before Reconstruction ended, former guerrillas, with some help from friends, began working to soften public perceptions of their peculiar way of making war. They had no intention of sacrificing their reputation on the altar of the Confederacy, nor did they believe it necessary so to do.13

It was no enviable task. Prejudice against them ran deep, and the fact that ex-guerrillas kept at it for over a half-century suggests that many people spurned their explanations. They built their case slowly, with only a few public defenses offered in memoirs, reminiscences, and published commentaries during the 1860s and 1870s; but even as their campaign gained momentum, it was a hit-and-miss affair, not at all planned or coordinated, and not always an honest or forthright one. Lasting well into the twentieth century, their efforts first became noticeable in the late 1880s, around the same time that many army veterans published their reminiscences, including contributions to Century Magazine’s fabulously successful “Battles and Leaders” series. Yet, the guerrilla campaign cannot be fully appreciated by tracing it chronologically. Rather, its scope and intent is best illustrated by examining five themes used across the decades to change hearts and shape future memories.

12. Inscoe, Race, War, and Remembrance, 322–49, summarizes efforts to write guerrillas out of history. Early attempts to avoid using the words “guerrilla” and “partisan” may be found in the monthly magazine The Land We Love and Southern Historical Society Papers, discussed below.
The most consistent, and nearly universal, justification for their way of waging war was the insistence that it had been forced on them. It was the only way, ex-guerrillas maintained, to defend homes and families against barbarous Union soldiers and vengeful federal policies. Having themselves been accused of conducting an “uncivilized” war, they turned the tables by blaming the whole mess on their adversaries.

Men who “went to the bush,” explained an Arkansas guerrilla in 1897, “would have staid in the regular army if it had not been that their friends had been so cruelly treated as they had—that was the quickest way for them to get revenge.” Another guerrilla, writing in 1905, gave a graphic description of the Union depredations that sent him into the guerrilla ranks. “There were many acts of barbarous cruelty,” he insisted. “Sick and wounded men were dragged out of their beds and brutally murdered in the presence of families. House burning was of almost daily occurrence. It was no unusual sight to see from some elevated point in the country smoke ascending from burning homes in widely separated localities.”

The stories could be poignant. Another man claimed to have left the conventional army because the Federals had kept his sixty-five-year-old stepfather locked up for nearly a month. Not until the guerrilla’s mother, herself quite feeble, walked twenty-five miles to plead his case was her husband set free. “This kind of treatment to innocent people had a great deal to do with shaping the remainder of my life as a soldier,” the guerrilla confessed. Union soldiers “had possession of our homes and made heavy threats,” he said, and “they continued to hunt me down until I decided to try to play an even game with them.” An old Kentucky bushwhacker, who had carved seventeen notches in his rifle stock by the end of the war, had his story retold by a young friend: “At the beginning the blue coats had raided his home and burned it and held him as a hostage, from which he miraculously escaped and immediately went on the warpath, solitary and alone.”

Some of the Confederacy’s most notorious bushwhackers claimed this shield for their actions. The largely illiterate Samuel S. Hildebrand, who killed


scores of men—some said hundreds—in southern Missouri and northern Arkansas, dictated his memoirs to an enterprising journalist who published the story in 1870. Hildebrand entered the bush because unionist neighbors and Union soldiers had abused his family and murdered three brothers. “I sought revenge and I found it,” he said plainly; “the key of hell was not suffered to rust in the lock while I was on the war path.” Deprived of a “happy home and the joys of domestic peace and quietude,” Hildebrand may have waged a “merciless war,” but only in “self-defense.”

John “Captain Jack” Hinson survived the war in West Tennessee, and, being in his mid-fifties, there was no reason for him ever to have joined it. Not, that is, until Union soldiers unjustly executed his two sons as guerrillas—executed, then decapitated them. Hinson wreaked vengeance for the next two years as a bushwhacker, or, as he and his friends would have it, a Confederate “sniper.” Whatever they called him, he was a deadly shot who killed thirty-six Federals.

Nor did defenders of the guerrilla war hesitate to resurrect the dead. In Kentucky, Marcellus Jerome Clarke, better known as “Sue Mundy,” had been captured and executed before the war ended, but a boyhood friend defended his reputation in the pages of the Southern Bivouac, published between 1882 and 1887 in Louisville by the Kentucky branch of the Southern Historical Society. As an early and enthusiastic architect of the “Lost Cause” movement, the Southern Bivouac might have been expected to steer clear of the guerrilla conflict. Instead, the magazine embraced its Kentucky roots, where the irregular war had been particularly nasty and had left a violent legacy. Only sixteen years old when the war started, Clarke had served in the conventional army before joining the partisan rangers of Adam Rankin Johnson, but it was not until he witnessed a captured friend being shot in the head that Clarke turned killer. “The rage of Jerome Clark [sic] knew no bounds as he knelt over his beloved friend,” came this testament. “He swore repeatedly he would never take another prisoner alive, and as soon as possible he left Johnson’s command and started out on his mission of vengeance.”

Like Clarke, William T. Anderson also died in the war, but friends claimed that he had an even more visceral reason for hating Yankees. While the baby-faced Clarke had earned the sobriquet “Sue,” Anderson became known as “Bloody Bill,” and one of his band recalled why their leader decided in his early twenties to wage war as a guerrilla. “Not until his aged father had been made to dig his own grave, forced to stand over it, falling therein when shot,” this man maintained, “and not until a sister had been killed by a house falling on her that had been purposely undermined by a band of [Charles R.] Jennison’s Jayhawkers who had murdered his father, did Bill Anderson take up arms against the government.” Another of his men thought Anderson treated people more cruelly than was necessary but then concluded, “I can not blame him much, considering the way his folks had been treated.”

John W. Mobberly, yet another casualty of the war, also had a postwar defender. A year younger even than Clarke, Mobberly was working on a farm in Loudon County, Virginia, when the place was invaded by Union soldiers. The Federals used such “insulting language to the lady of the house” that the lad “swore he would avenge the insult.” Enlisting in Elijah V. White’s semi-independent “Comanches” (officially, the 35th Virginia Cavalry Battalion), this “military genius” soon commanded his own detachment of partisans and put things right. “It is a recognized fact,” insisted one of his former superiors, “that he killed more Yankees than any man in the Army of Northern Virginia” and “became the terror of the Union people.”

The Confederacy’s conventional soldiers both envied and resented men like Hinson, Clarke, Anderson, and Mobberly. They envied their independent status and unfettered ability to wage war but also thought their murderous reputations had injured the rebel cause. Still, at least one ex-cavalryman understood why men might choose such a questionable path. “I was always strongly opposed to guerrilla warfare,” he told readers of the Confederate Veteran, official organ of the United Confederate Veterans, “believing it wrong and a poor way to settle anything; yet I want to give you a few facts as to the causes for guerrilla warfare. . . . [I]t was strictly a war of retaliation. . . . [against] the boasted . . . barbarity” of the Federals, and it would be “many years yet, if ever,” he predicted, “before the people of . . . the South forget these outrages of rape, murder, and destruction of their homes and property.”

A similar benediction came from a Methodist minister. Writing after the war about the terrors he had witnessed in Missouri, the preacher insisted, “Men who, at first, had no thought of entering either army, found themselves forced, by circumstances, to take up arms in what was, by construction, called self-defense.” He continued, “By constant annoyance from armed men, by harassing fears, from threats and rumors of mischief to person and property, frequent arrests, pillaging, plunder, etc., many a peaceable, quiet, orderly citizen was tormented into the necessity of taking up arms.”

The minister blamed punitive Union military policies for much of the oppression, a theme ex-guerrillas eagerly took up. The Union army made things worse, they said, by treating captured guerrillas as brigands and murderers, subject to drumhead courts martial and summary executions. The retaliation was intended to intimidate guerrillas, to force them to give up their irregular war, but it was an unproductive approach. With almost certain death the price of failure, men already in the bush saw few options but to wage an equally unforgiving war. “We tried to fight like soldiers,” insisted a Missourian in 1915, “but were declared outlaws, hunted under a black flag and murdered like beasts.” Where once, at the start of the war, claimed another man, irregular bands had vied with one another to see who could “be the most magnanimous toward prisoners,” they, too, began to execute captives.

This line of thinking gave rise to a second strategy for salvaging the guerrilla’s good name. Pointing not to the Federals but to the ruthless gangs of southern unionists who had threatened their lives and property, ex-rebels claimed that these were the real villains of the war. The Missouri minister wrote of “predatory bands . . . commissioned to make war upon these innocent and defenseless people.” Nor were the villains always homegrown. “Armed brigands came down from Kansas and Iowa, and over from Illinois,” said this man of God, “to plunder and rob the rich farmers of Missouri, and many of the poor ones, too, in the name of the Union.” As though to prove this point, a Missouri bushwhacker described himself as a “law-abiding American citizen,” intent only on planting a spring crop, until the oppression of Kansas jayhawkers and Union soldiers caused him to put down his hoe and pick up a revolver. This was neither a war between nations nor a war for independence, but rather, the most visceral sort of civil war.

22. W. M. Leftwich, Martyrdom . . . During the Late Civil War in Missouri (St. Louis: Southwestern Book and Publishing Company, 1870), 163.
Again reversing roles, ex-guerrillas tarred unionists as “bushwhackers,” a name the Federals often applied to rebel irregulars. With its implications of cowardice and lone gunmen murdering foes from under cover, the accusation, like the Union army’s draconian military policies, had given the rebels free rein to retaliate in kind. And of course, when former Confederates spoke of their own “bushwhackers,” the word assumed a very different meaning. Confederates were “daring bushwhackers.” One man recalled “an aged citizen” of West Virginia, clad in “hunting shirt of home-spun” and armed with a squirrel rifle, who filled the role perfectly. Asked how long his community could “hold out” against the Federals, the intrepid mountaineer had replied, “They may take the cities and perhaps the lowlands, but we can bushwhack them for forty years.”25

Unionist bushwhackers were said to have been particularly thick in Kentucky and Tennessee. In the former state, they endangered Confederate communications. Gen. Basil W. Duke, who, as one of John Hunt Morgan’s “raiders,” had seen much of the war in Kentucky, emphasized that while both Union and Confederate bushwhackers prowled the state, “the former were more numerous.” Another man, in retelling the exploits of his own regiment, the 11th Kentucky Cavalry, recalled doing battle with “a little army of [unionist] home guards and bushwhackers.” A Kentucky soldier turned guerrilla when a notorious Tennessean named Blaylock, a “self-branded demon” who led a local home guard, murdered some of his friends.26

It is unclear how many Confederate soldiers, despite their objections to the irregular war, eventually joined guerrilla bands, but repeated reports of old neighborhoods being threatened by skulking unionists tempted many of them. “You can imagine our mental agonies and how hard it was for us to keep from leaving the regular army and going back inside the Federal lines to still hunt for those miserable miscreants who, calling themselves ‘home guards,’ were only a pack of cowardly murderers and thieves,” an ex-soldier admitted in the Confederate Veteran. Referring specifically to Northwest

Arkansas and Southwest Missouri, he added, “If people generally understood
the true state of things in that unhappy country at that time, there would
be not be so much condemnation of the desperate warfare of [William C.]

The editors of the Southern Historical Society Papers, first published in 1876
in Richmond, and generally emphasizing the conduct of the war in Virginia,
also reminded readers of how treacherous had been those murdering unionists.
“Bushwhackers, native born white men of East Tennessee and Southern Ken-
tucky, as savage and relentless, and nearly as ignorant, as any redskin of romance
or of history,” read an 1881 indictment, “infested the country, waylaid the roads,
and from mountain side and behind rock or bush shot down the unfortunates
who, journeying by themselves or in small parties, wore the Confederate gray,
and dispatched the wounded, without mercy, in the name of patriotism and the
Union.” Long after the war, entire communities fondly recalled the “guerrilla
chiefs” who had defied this riff-raff. “Exposed to depredations of robber bands
of federals,” reminded the editor of the Southern Bivouac, “the guerrillas were
a kind of mounted police, who took upon themselves all the duties of a civil
government to protect the life and property of the citizens.”

Combining their loathing for both Union soldiers and southern unionists, ex-guerrillas were also quick to remind people that the Union army had recruited unionists as soldiers and scouts and that these men had become infamous for their cruelty toward civilians. Tennessee units had the worst reputations, as so many of their own men had suffered abuse at the hands of rebel soldiers and neighbors. The Union’s 6th Tennessee Cavalry, led by Fielding Hurst, was reviled both during and after the war as “the very worst element among what was known as ‘Union men.”’ The Confederate Veteran described Hurst as a “freebooter” who terrorized rebel citizens in Mississippi, Alabama, and Tennessee with his “indiscriminate plundering.” The 2d Tennessee Mounted Infantry was not much better, for while that regiment may have included some “good soldiers,” it also harbored “some of the worst wretches that ever disgraced the uniform of the U.S. Army or any other army.”

Memories of a Rooted Sorrow

Ex-guerrillas also pointed to the many criminals who had used the chaos of the conflict to steal and murder for private gain while posing as “patriotic” rebel guerrillas. It was they, said ex-Confederates, who had shaped false wartime perceptions of all guerrillas. One former rebel described just such a gang that operated on the Kentucky-Tennessee border. “They were the most hideous looking human beings in the form of men that we ever saw,” he declared; “their long hair and beards, old flopped hats, ragged clothes, bare feet, filthy, savage appearance, all indicated the lowest type of humanity.” He identified these “desperate characters” as the “notorious Sizemore gang,” fiends “who left no living witnesses to testify to their atrocious crimes.” In North Alabama, these men were called “buggers,” described by a survivor of their devilry as “renegades” who “joined together with the lowest of the po’ white trash . . . into gangs of outlaws” to murder, rob, torture, and burn out loyal Confederates.30

Compared to such motley crews as these ones, even the least admirable rebel could be portrayed as honest and forthright. Champ Ferguson, for instance, captured toward the end of the war and eventually executed for murder, was described by a sympathetic journalist who had interviewed him as “genteel and modest” with a “pleasing smile.” When informed of his fate, “he met death in a brave spirit and unflinching determination to die game.” The Confederate Veteran, in a biographical sketch years later, described Ferguson benignly as “a typical mountaineer,” reared with “that strict idea of right that belongs to the mountain character.” He stood in sharp contrast, continued this admirer, to his most fierce unionist rival, Tinker Dave Beaty. Quoting Basil Duke, who had fought alongside Champ and against Beaty, the magazine noted that Tinker Dave “possessed a cunning and subtlety which Ferguson, in a great manner, lacked.” Even more to the point, “there was not related of Beattie so many stories, illustrative of his personal strength and bull-dog courage, as of Ferguson.”31

An ex-guerrilla captain in Virginia insisted that his men were simply more humane than the Union soldiers who had pursued them. Having captured a Union officer known for the summary execution of guerrillas and

the mistreatment of their families, the rebels asked their prisoner what he thought should be done “with a man that had told our mothers, wives and daughters he would hang us in our front yard if he ever got hold of us.” Given the tone and circumstances of this inquisition, the Federal thought he was a goner. Instead, to his utter astonishment, the rebels released him, though with a warning: Thereafter, should his men “burn a house or turn a family out doors,” the guerrillas would “burn a federal on every corner of it.”

A third approach to rehabilitating their image found ex-guerrillas admitting that cruel things had been done in the name of the Confederacy, but then disavowing the most evil of their comrades. “Now I don’t pretend to say that we had no men in the Southern army or among the guerrilla forces who did not commit any bad crimes,” contended an Arkansan. “We had some men in our command who got to be almost as bad as the Kansas Jayhawkers. Some men are natural thieves anyway, and often crimes are committed by them contrary to the will of their commanding officers.” Unfortunately, he concluded, “that class of men were found on both sides.”

A member of Bill Anderson’s band agreed. An unbridled killer like Bloody Bill was likely to win the allegiance of some hard men, and one loyal follower acknowledged in 1913 that, while most of the band had honorable reasons for waging a guerrilla war, “a few marauding members” may have “crept” into their ranks. “But every army has its sulkers and its traitors,” he reasoned. “The many must not be held accountable for the acts of the few.” One of Quantrill’s men conceded that some “bad men” may have “plundered the helpless, pillaged the friend and foe alike, assaulted non-combatants and murdered the unresisting and the innocent,” but “such devils' work,” he stressed, “was not Guerrilla work.”

Defenders of the Lost Cause could use this cleverly understated approach to endorse the guerrilla war while distancing themselves from clearly heinous acts. For instance, few old Confederates wished to be associated with Quantrill’s August 1863 raid on Lawrence, Kansas, especially not with the murder of over 150 defenseless men and boys. So, in publishing the reminiscences of one of the raiders, who suggested that “extenuating circumstances” had to be considered

32. Scott, *Four Years’ Service*, 36.
in judging the massacre, the editor of the Confederate Veteran felt compelled to remind readers that, whatever the provocation for Quantrill’s men, the excesses of the Lawrence raid were “abhorred” by all honorable men.35

Some of the Confederacy’s most murderous guerrillas even showed remorse for their own misdeeds. Henry C. Magruder, at twenty-four years of age, was one the last guerrillas to be tried and executed after the war. He denied most of the charges against him, which included at least seventeen murders and several rapes in Kentucky and Tennessee. However, in his “confession” to a clergyman, made while awaiting trial and published shortly after his death, Magruder attributed any dark deeds to the fact that he had been born a bastard, and so treated as an “outcast” all his life. “By the very fact of my existence the rest of mankind declared war against me,” he wailed, “and that for no crime of mine, only my sad misfortune; and by the same right I have hated mankind.” Death, he said, would be a relief. The publisher of his confession rejoiced that Magruder had received the last rites of the Catholic Church before being led to the gallows and hoped his final words would have a “moral effect upon the young men of the nation.”36

An equally unsympathetic Missourian, who became a guerrilla because he wanted “to see blood flow in revenge for the outrages the jayhawkers had committed,” also displayed a conscience. He recounted, in particular, an occasion when the twelve-year-old daughter of a man murdered in her presence ran after the gang shouting that God would punish them for the foul deed. The killing “could not be helped,” he insisted forty years later, but the little girl’s words still haunted him. “Sometimes,” he admitted, “I think I can hear her cries as she followed along behind us.”37

Some men sought redemption by leading productive postwar lives and preaching the virtues of peace. Despite his own questionable postwar career as an outlaw, Cole Younger rattled off the names of later sheriffs, judges, state legislators, congressmen, and other professionals who had ridden with Quantrill. Most who survived the war, he insisted, “settled down to become good citizens in peaceful walks of life.” Similarly, one of John Hunt Morgan’s

men boasted of comrades who went on to become legislators and judicial officers, not to mention pursuing honorable livings as “mechanics, farmers, merchants, bankers, teachers, physicians, lawyers, and ministers of the gospel.” Remember, he intoned, that “good soldiers in time of war make good citizens in time of peace.” An Arkansan, writing his memoirs at the behest of his grandchildren, concluded, “If it serves to impress upon their minds even to a limited degree the horrors of war and the blessings of peace, I will be amply repaid for my time and labor.”

Such evidence of rehabilitation likely had more effect than all the rhetoric, at least on the postwar neighbors of aging guerrillas. This certainly seems to have been true for Jack Hinson. Returning home after the war to operate a mill and general store, he seemed to have been forgiven his past until the U.S. government caught up with him in 1873. He was to be tried by a military commission until friends intervened. “Captain Jack is a brave man, a rude untutored hero,” insisted a local newspaper, “a thief and a scoundrel no doubt when viewed through the social ideas we have, but a hero nevertheless. His execution would serve no good purpose, while it would be a crowning act of infamy.” Whether or not the government proceeded with the prosecution is unknown, but Jack died peaceably at home a year later.

Other ex-guerrillas led such upright postwar lives that friends and neighbors were inspired to purify their legacy. The obituary of a Virginia irregular declared, “He was a good soldier and a favorite among all his comrades, having won their high regard by his attention to duty, his sturdy honesty, and sterling worth.” Of an Alabamian it was said, “He became a Christian early in life, and . . . [h]is unflattering faith and confidence in the promises of God were an inspiration to others throughout his life.” A North Carolina guerrilla captain was described at his passing as “a gentleman, . . . a man of considerable culture, a lawyer by profession.” Writing of his former captain for the Confederate Veteran, a former Arkansas guerrilla insisted, “I never knew a nobler, braver, or truer gentleman. . . . I never heard a word escape his lips that might not have been uttered in the presence of ladies. He was modest and retiring in disposition, and always ready to give others credit who really were not as deserving as himself.”

Interestingly, too, never once did this Arkansan refer to himself or his leader as a “guerrilla.” Instead, he said, they belonged to a “company of cavalry,” attached to “Buck Brown’s Battalion,” with no hint that William Martin “Buck” Brown was one of the most active and effective rebel guerrilla leaders in the state. Shedding the “guerrilla” label was even important to Henry Magruder, who reserved both that word and “bushwhacker” for southern unionists. Another of Buck Brown’s battalion always referred to himself and former comrades as “soldiers” and insisted that they represented the “bone and sinew” of their communities. “A more honorable set of men never lived,” he submitted.41

A fourth strategy followed naturally from this image of the benign bushwhacker: the guerrilla as romantic hero, with the entire guerrilla war portrayed as a chivalric clash by knights-errant against the forces of evil. The irregular’s independent mode of fighting, free of the dull drudgery of everyday soldiering, had appealed to young men during the war, and as they reminisced about wartime adventures, ex-guerrillas emphasized this dimension of their lives. They had taken to the bush with pure hearts and noble intentions, a “luminous patriotism” having then led them to “kill in the name of God and . . . country.” Such sentiments dissolved all hint of meanness or cruelty, and in one way or another, suffused most other efforts to rehabilitate themselves.42

The earliest postwar southern literary magazines, including The Land We Love and its later incarnations as the New Eclectic Magazine and the Southern Magazine, found this approach acceptable if used to describe the exploits of partisans, rather than guerrillas. Partisan rangers, who operated behind enemy lines as adjuncts to the regular cavalry, had been the only irregular warriors sanctioned by the Confederate government. They wore regulation uniforms and were governed by the same rules as conventional soldiers. Midway through the war even the U.S. government acknowledged their legitimate status, by ordering that captured partisans be treated as conventional soldiers. Accordingly, postwar southern magazines called partisans “scouts” or otherwise implied that they had been soldiers, and the stories about them almost always involved audacious raids or other romantic

---

42. Burch, Charles W. Quantrill, 25; Younger, Story of Cole Younger, 56.
exploits. For instance, in 1869, the *New Eclectic Magazine* described how the “brave captain of a partisan company” near Rienzi, Mississippi, singlehandedly captured a Union patrol of six men. “[It was] an occurrence,” said the contributor, “which, for individual daring and brilliant success, I do not think was surpassed during the progress on the war.”

Adherence to this partisan rule loosened over time, but only slightly. By the early 1880s, while enterprising publishers had tapped into a rich market for the adventures of scouts and partisans on both sides, it remained relatively rare to find a notoriously vicious guerrilla or bushwhacker cast as romantic hero. Quantrill came closest, possibly because several of his former followers, including Frank and Jesse James, had gone on to become folk heroes in their own right, as postwar outlaws. One of Bill Anderson’s men objected to Quantrill’s reputation being left “to the imagination of the romancers” yet used fairly fanciful language to describe this “superhuman if not supernatural” guerrilla chief. “Quantrill was, to the Guerrillas, their voice in tumult, their beacon in a crisis and their hand in action,” he suggested in 1903.

Whether guerrilla or partisan, an important measure of nobility depended on how much respect and support irregulars received from brave Confederate women, and here again, Quantrill found supporters. A Missouri woman insisted in 1901 that his reputation as a “bloodthirsty bandit” bore no resemblance to the “modest, quiet, good-looking man . . . gentle of manner and courteous” she had known. Her description might have been written by one of Quantrill’s own men, who praised their chief in like language. As one of them recalled, “He never sought notoriety, but on the contrary was very modest and retiring, especially in the company of ladies. I have heard him time and again say that he would shoot any man in the command who would insult or abuse women or children.”

Guerrillas elsewhere made similar claims. “Their [the men’s] honor was made conspicuous,” an Arkansas guerrilla stressed, “in their deportment toward the noble ladies who trusted them so fully and served them so faithfully. The best ladies of the country had no hesitancy in putting themselves

under our care.” Other men emphasized how their defense of female honor and welfare contrasted starkly with the behavior of the Union ruffians who had occupied their towns and pillaged their farms.46

While no ladies were involved, one of the most successful romantic portrayals of a guerrilla came in a series of adventurous tales published in the *Southern Bivouac.* “The Bold Guerrilla Boy,” supposedly based on the diary of an eighteen-year-old Virginian named Samuel R. Buster, was probably fictional, but Buster’s story is full of brilliant raids, narrow escapes, and light-hearted derring-do. “I like this guerrilla life very much,” he declared early in the series, which ran for seventeen months in the mid-1880s. “A man can do just as much (in fact, more) for his country as he can in the regular army.” Buster’s odyssey appeared in the magazine’s monthly “Youth Department,” which substituted “real heroes” for the “imaginary ones found in most of the literature of the present day.” Its lessons, though, were clearly intended for an audience wider than just adolescent boys.47

Nonetheless, when dealing with actual events and real people, partisan rangers remained the most chivalrous actors in the guerrilla war. In describing the exploits of John Hanson McNeill’s band of Virginia partisan rangers, the *Southern Bivouac* gushed, “Their achievements, though trifling in magnitude, were sudden and brilliant, and were clothed by rumor with a glamor of romance.” McNeill’s own men soon picked up the theme, one of them telling how ten rangers boarded a train to capture, through stealth, one hundred Yankees. To foes, John Mobberly, who operated in the same region as McNeill, was a “notorious guerrilla”; friends called him the “Prince of Dare-devils,” a man “devoid of fear,” whose “exploits were so daring and so successful that every device the enemy could employ was used to catch or kill him.” In the end, he died the romantic death of a martyr, assassinated by a friend for the sake of a $1,000 reward.48

John J. Dickison, Florida’s best known partisan ranger, was too modest to

---

47. Quoted are J. S. Blackburn, “The Bold Guerrilla Boy,” *Southern Bivouac* 2 (Mar. 1884): 222, and back cover of the December 1883 issue of volume 2. The series ran from December 1883 to April 1885. In an editorial published in February 1884, the magazine complained that “the average Southern youth” knew far too little about the “heroes of the last war” (284).
claim credit publicly for his exploits, but he very likely served as ghostwriter for his wife’s romantically inclined “reminiscences,” published in 1890. “My brave soldiers,” she quoted him as saying before one raid, “we are going to cross the river to-night. I expect to lead you where there is danger. We must protect our friends on the east side of the river.” Having set the scene, Mrs. Dickison took it from there. “Not one of that heroic little band faltered in their duty,” she assured readers. “Their prompt response had the ring of the true metal, and from that moment their destiny and his own were to be one and the same.” Adding still more glamour to Dickison’s career, Florida poet Columbus Drew penned at least two poems that likened him to a medieval knight, Robin Hood, and Francis Marion, the “Swamp Fox” of Revolutionary War fame:

   His trusty sword well girded, his weapons all aprime,
   He sprang into his saddle like a knight of olden time.
   Then when the steeds were chafing, and fronted in the light,
   “Men,” said the valiant Dickison, “we cross the stream to-night!”

Few irregulars showed more dash and swagger than the men who followed John Hunt Morgan and John S. Mosby. While more “raider” than officially anointed partisan ranger, Morgan used guerrilla tactics and was labeled in the North’s wartime press as a “bandit” and “highwayman.” Like so many other partisan chiefs, he died during the war, but that only added to his legendary status. To ex-Confederates, he became the “gallant Morgan—the prince of gentlemen!” The editor of the Southern Bivouac insisted that Morgan’s 1863 raid through Indiana and Ohio, despite that he and most of his men were captured, would “ever be invested with a romantic interest.” The editor continued: “The boldness of the attempt, the novel perils encountered, and the disastrous ending lend to it features of heroic adventure.” Addressing a reunion of Morgan’s men in 1883, Basil Duke waxed eloquent: “All the old life of raid and combat, the night march beneath the stars, the surprise and melee at daybreak, the green camping-grounds by the running waters, all revive in my memory, and I can almost believe that I may again behold those ‘true old times.’”

Only Mosby’s men, led by their magnetic commander, could match the Kentuckians for heroics. An early postwar assessment of Mosby, published in *The Land We Love*, said that he “revel[ed] in that fearful danger which has but two results, death and destruction, or success and immortal name.” Had the war continued, insisted this observer, Mosby “would have rivaled his great prototype—Marshal [Jean-Andoche] Junot.” One of Mosby’s men reminded people in 1896 that “defenseless people would have been at the mercy of the roving bands of deserters, . . . horse thieves and desperadoes” had it not been for Virginia’s partisans. Even old foes, including Philip H. Sheridan and Ulysses S. Grant, both of whom despised guerrillas, spoke well of Mosby. He was also the only ex-guerrilla or partisan asked to describe his exploits in *Century Magazine*’s Battles and Leaders series.51

One of Mosby’s men spoke for the entire battalion in 1867. “The life of a guerilla is a dangerous one, but it has its charms,” he insisted. “Its independence and freedom from restraint, and, above all, the opportunity for bold and daring actions, which carry with them personal renown, makes this life far preferable to a position in the regular army, where men stand up like posts to be shot at, and where there is little or no opportunity for the display of personal courage.”

Fifthly, and ultimately, some former guerrillas simply made no excuses for their wartime careers. Rather, they dared anyone to challenge their motives, and they gloried in their name. “I have often seen the term—Guerilla Chief—applied to me in Southern papers,” Mosby pointed out in 1899. “I never regarded it as an insult.” If he and his men had been called “guerrillas and bushwhackers,” what of it? “Bushwhacking is perfectly legitimate in war,” and what else, if not guerrillas, he asked, were the “embattled farmers” at Lexington and Concord?

Similarly, Adam Rankin Johnson insisted, “The many epithets hurled at me individually by my foes did not disturb me in the least,” and he was pleased to recall that the name “Partisan Rangers” was “a title highly relished” by his men. Johnson titled his memoirs, published in 1904, The Partisan Rangers of the Confederate States and said he had written the book “to pay tribute to the Kentuckey boys, who, most of them gently born and nurtured, left home, family, friends, fortune behind them, and, enlisting in my command, fought for the Cause of the South.”

Genuine guerrillas, as opposed to the more glamorous rangers, joined this defiant chorus. Champ Ferguson refused to concede that any of the dozens of men he killed had, in fact, been murdered. “I . . . will die a Rebel,” he insisted in his final hours. “I believe I was Right in all I did.” A Missourian declared, “We had nothing to regret in that we had dun only wishied we had dun more.”

---

52. J. Marshall Crawford, Mosby and His Men (New York: G. W. Carleton, 1867), 14
Nor would Sam Hildebrand yield a single inch. “War was the objective and war it was,” read his published testament. “It is very difficult to carry on a war for four years without some one getting hurt. If I did kill over a hundred men during the war, it was only because I was in earnest and supposed that everybody else was.” He offered no apologies for his “acts of retaliation,” and, like Mosby, he did not shy away from the name “bushwhacker”: “My enemies say that I am a ‘Bushwhacker.’ Very well, what is a ‘Bushwhacker?’ He is a man who shoots his enemies. What is a regular army but a conglomerate mass of Bushwhackers?”

Frank James recalled perhaps the second most notorious incident—in which Bill Anderson’s band participated, the Centralia massacre. On that day in September 1864, Anderson’s guerrillas first executed about two dozen unarmed Union soldiers at the town’s railroad depot. Then, outside of town, they nearly wiped out a detachment of over one hundred Union cavalymen before scalping or mutilating several of them. James justified the latter action by insisting that the enemy had carried a “black flag” into battle, meaning “no quarter.” “We did not seek the fight,” James went on. “[The Union officer] foolishly came out to hunt us and he found us. Then we killed him and his men. Wouldn’t he have killed every one of us if he had the chance? What is war for if it isn’t to kill people for a principle?”

So these were principled and righteous men with nothing of which to be ashamed. Indeed, James insisted, far more men than the public supposed admired the way rebel guerrillas had fought for those principles. “Funny, isn’t it?” he observed. “I’ve met or heard of thousands of men who claimed to be with Quantrill or his lieutenants during the war, when the truth is there were never more than three hundred or four hundred from the beginning to the end of the war.”

Even more defiantly, some of Quantrill’s men dared to justify the Lawrence massacre. It was widely reported that one reason Quantrill led the raid was to retaliate for the collapse of a prison in Kansas City that injured or killed several female relatives of men under his command. John McCorkle, who


57. Ibid., 30.
participated in the raid, called the Kansas City tragedy “murder,” and said it was the “direct cause” of Quantrill’s action. Having thus offered a justification for all that followed, McCorkle, who also described the events at Centralia as an ordinary skirmish, concluded, “Quantrill and his command had come to Lawrence to be avenged and they were. In this raid, a few innocent men may have been killed but this was not intentional.” Cole Younger, who would ride with the James gang as an outlaw after the war, admitted that it was “a day of butchery,” but he mentioned only a fight with Union soldiers and stressed that no women had been killed in the raid.58

Other ex-guerrillas pointed to the restraint they had shown during the war. An Arkansan recalled a “retaliatory raid” against a “noted [unionist] raider and houseburner” named James Moore. Swooping down on Moore’s farm in hopes of capturing him, the rebels found only his wife and daughters, although that did not stop them, after escorting Mrs. Moore and the children to safety, from burning the house and outbuildings. “Looking back . . . now,” wrote the Arkansan, “when all the bitterness engendered by the war is a thing of the past, I sincerely regret the burning of the Moore house; not through any sympathy or respect for him, but because women and children were the immediate sufferers. But that was war . . . We could have burned many more homes had we chosen to do so, but we were content with the burning of the one.” A Tennessean recalled how Champ Ferguson passed up an opportunity to burn “to ashes” the home town of William B. Stokes, whose Union 5th Tennessee Cavalry was nearly as reviled by Rebels as Fielding Hurst’s 6th Tennessee. Instead, Ferguson’s men “destroyed only one storehouse and a barn.”59

This unrepentant tone grew partly from a belief that, say what people might about their mode of warfare, rebel guerrillas had made important contributions to the Confederate war effort. Indeed, they were convinced, and not without reason, that the Union army had condemned them as outlaws mainly because their military operations against the Federals had been extremely effective and that their harassment of southern unionists had been a political embarrassment to the U.S. government. “We had . . . accomplished more than we had reasonably hoped with such limited means, opposed often and threatened by so much larger forces than our own,” surmised Adam Johnson,

58. Barton, Three Years with Quantrill, 120–26, 162–66; Younger, Story of Cole Younger, 45. For the most unrepentant defense of the raid, see Dalton, Under the Black Flag, 96–103.
who noted with some pride that “the mere mention of our name inspired fear in the hearts of the Federals.”

One of the most comprehensive postwar justifications for the guerrilla conflict came from a non-guerrilla, though someone who knew them well and spoke on their behalf. Maj. John N. Edwards, while serving as adjutant to Gen. Joseph O. Shelby during the war, had come in contact with some of Missouri’s best-known guerrillas. After the war, Edwards became an apologist for the outlaw exploits of the James brothers, but he also saw no reason for them or any other rebel to apologize for their wartime careers. In their defense, he created an elaborate picture of the guerrilla as local hero.

Edwards’s principal vehicle was an 1877 hagiographic volume entitled Noted Guerrillas. In explaining the war waged by such men as Quantrill and Bill Anderson, he utilized all five of the defenses explored above, but, like Sam Hildebrand and his own friend Frank James, Edwards ultimately saw no need to excuse their actions. “Civil war might well have made the Guerrilla,” he said pointedly, “but only the excesses of civil war could have made him the untamable and unmerciful creature that history finds him. When he first went into the war, he was somehow imbued with the old-fashioned belief that soldiering meant fighting and that fighting meant killing. He had his own ideas about soldiering, however, and desired nothing so much as to remain at home and meet its despoilers upon his own premises.”

Nonetheless, few men who had served in the Confederate army cared to be associated with ex-guerrillas. As old soldiers, North and South, formed veterans’ organizations, they rarely invited guerrillas to join them. Partisans and guerrillas tended to form their own, separate groups and hold their own, separate reunions. As stone monuments were erected on Civil War battlefields to commemorate the brave deeds of conventional soldiers, few reminders of the guerrilla war stood among them. As John Edwards put it in his typically florid style, “The Guerrilla had no graveyard. . . . No cortege followed the corpse; beneath the folds of the black flag there was no funeral. Neither prayer, nor plaint of priest, nor penitential pleading went up for the

60. Johnson, Partisan Rangers, 120–21.
Like most irregulars, whether Partisan Rangers or independent guerrillas, Mosby’s men, pictured here at a 1920 reunion, remained a breed apart from other Confederate veterans. Image courtesy of the Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

wild beast dead by his lair, hard hunted yet splendid at last in the hopeless equanimity of accepted death.”

A notable exception to this lack of commemoration was a twenty-five-foot tall granite shaft erected in Virginia in 1899 to honor Mosby’s men. Yet, the event it commemorated was a telling one, for rather than being a reminder of Mosby’s victories and triumphs, the monument marked the spot where six

of his men had been executed by Union troops. The unstated message was clear. While rebel guerrillas might sometimes garner sympathy as victims of war, no one wished to celebrate their deeds. Even Mosby, despite taking pride in being a guerrilla chief, had no wish to dwell on how the conflict had been conducted. “The bloody part of the War,” he wrote, “I like to keep in the background.”

And so, as fascinating and complex as we know the guerrilla war to have been, it is equally fascinating to consider how, in retrospect, wartime events were overlaid by the anxious concerns of men who wished to be judged well by future generations. If theirs were memories of a rooted sorrow, as Shakespeare’s Macbeth would have it, the story of the guerrilla war yet remains an intriguing example of the convergence of memory and history and of how memory may be used to obscure as well as to illuminate the past.

64. “Monument to Mosby’s Men,” 250–53; Mitchell, Letters of Mosby, 214–15. Ten granite markers were erected in Clarke County, Virginia, in the 1890s to commemorate actions by Mosby’s Rangers in 1864–65, but they are simple affairs, no larger than tombstones. An impressive monument to Mosby alone was erected in Fauquier County in 1920, but it is a tribute to him as both a lawyer and a soldier. See Timothy S. Sedore, An Illustrated Guide to Virginia’s Confederate Monuments (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 2011), 32–36, 38–39, 169.