

Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War by Megan Kate Nelson. University of Georgia Press, 2012, 400 pages. ISBN: 978-0-8203-4251-1, Paperback, \$24.95

Kristen Brill*
University of Cambridge

Megan Kate Nelson's *Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War* analyzes the role of abstract and material ruination in constructing the Union and Confederate regional psyches. Synthesizing a vast and diverse thematic scope of ruination — urban, domestic, environmental and bodily — Nelson shows the war's dualistic power to simultaneously destroy and create. Considering the Civil War as an ongoing process of destruction and reconstruction, Nelson poses a fresh and compelling framework to examine the concept of ruination as an omnipresent continuum within the national narrative, with far-reaching implications beyond the war's end in 1865.

This book makes a unique contribution to two zeitgeist areas of interdisciplinary history: Environmental and Disability Studies. In the latter half of the book, Nelson executes a framework of analysis amalgamating these seemingly disparate arenas of study: both the environment of the home front and the wounded soldier's body physically map the trauma of the Civil War. The environment and body are microcosmic visual representations of the death and destruction of the macrocosmic military conflict. Extending the conceptual metaphor of the mutilated body to include the overarching devastation of the environment is an especially nuanced approach, and one that poses a new way of examining armed conflicts and wars. Moreover, Nelson provides new anecdotal and statistical information on Environmental and Disability Studies of the Civil War. In terms of environmental impact, she estimates the number of trees killed during the conflict — 2,000,000 from various building purposes and 25,000 from war wounds (p.152). In terms of disability, she chronicles the permeation of images and representations of disabled bodies in Civil War print culture. The production and circulation of these images testify to the ways in which the disabled body encompassed 'a range of social anxieties — including concerns about the impact of warfare on masculinity, the production of 'machine men', and the opportunities that wartime provided for fraudulent behavior' (p. 161).

Chapter One offers a particularly innovative approach; Nelson compares the multivalent effects of urban destruction North and South of the Mason-Dixon Line. Such an approach is useful as most scholarship focuses on the physical geography of the southern home front without providing a comparative context. Using Hampton, Virginia, Columbia, South Carolina and Chambersburg, Pennsylvania as case studies, Nelson draws out parallels between the physical processes of destruction and the effects of urban ruination on the respective regional psyches. Capturing the roles and responses of various actors in these episodes of urban destruction and decay — architects, citizens and military officers — the chapter creates a vibrant, fluid portrayal of these Civil War cities; offering perspectives from a diversity of positions within the localized social hierarchies.

* Kristen Brill is a PhD candidate in History at the University of Cambridge. She can be contacted at kb435@cam.ac.uk

The book also introduces new information in its second chapter, with abundant anecdotal references to instances of rape on the home front, detailed in southern newspapers and personal diaries. This is extremely important as there is an infamous paucity of primary documentation addressing the threat of sexual violence in the nineteenth-century South. As such, this research will be very useful to future scholarship in both Gender Studies and the Civil War. This chapter also surveys the damage to women's domestic spaces on the southern home front. In particular, Nelson shows how the war reconfigured women's notion of home through various kinds of military interventions into the domestic sphere. In doing so she builds a solid argument. However, a more developed contextualization of this argument within the antebellum historiography — namely, Catherine Clinton's *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (1983) and *Tara Revisited: Women, War and the Plantation Legend* (1995) — would have provided an even more convincing thesis, showing how such activity disrupted not only Confederate, but antebellum notions of the mutually constituted realms of southern womanhood and domesticity. This chapter also includes slave cabins in its analysis of the ruination of domestic spaces. The significance of this lies in the fact that it theorizes an expanded domestic sphere of the elite plantation South to include slave cabins and not simply the plantation owner's house. Additionally, by asserting the architecture and materiality of the slave cabin itself as an expression of slave agency, Nelson supports Stephanie M.H. Camp's seminal work on slave agency and resistance, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (2004).

Nelson delivers a particularly ambitious conclusion to her book. She claims that fetishizing historic material objects and failing to confront the ruins of the Civil War worked to develop 'a tendency in American culture to consume rather than directly confront the past' (p. 229). Nelson goes on to link this Civil War consumption-oriented commemoration process to the modern architectural designs of the Oklahoma City and September 11th World Trade Center memorials. This is a provocative corollary, substantiated by a cogent contemporary study of the role of mourning in the 21st century American imagination. With such a bold conclusion — historicizing modern memorialization as informed by the national memory of the Civil War — Nelson successfully establishes a rich and fertile terrain for future scholarship to explore and extend.

Overall, *Ruin Nation* presents a persuasive case to consider the role of urban, domestic, environmental and bodily destruction in the national narrative of the Civil War. Stylistically, its clear, fluent prose makes it accessible to a wide readership, including undergraduate students. Moreover, *Ruin Nation* makes a significant contribution to a number of diverse fields: Disability, Environmental and American Studies and is highly recommended reading to scholars of nineteenth-century American History.