

Flannery O'Connor's challenge to the Lost Cause myths of the Confederacy

A little-known O'Connor story explores the human cost of self-deception.

by [Pete Candler](#) in the [May 22, 2019](#) issue



Unveiling the Confederate monument at Arlington National Cemetery in June 1914. [Library of Congress.](#)

Imagine that you or someone you know participated in or in some way enabled a horrific act of sustained brutality and that, in order to erase the memory of these misdeeds, you then attempted to convince others that what was done was in fact a heroic defense of a noble ideal. Imagine the extent you would go to in order to convince others that what you fought for was not a reason for penitence but rather a cause that God would vindicate. Imagine that this historical erasure was so thorough that many people came to believe your cause was morally pure. And imagine that you then built monuments to your self-deception and were able to convince others that these monuments were now a sacred part of the landscape of the very same nation that you sought to extricate yourself from.

This, arguably, is the logic behind the Lost Cause and its many monuments to the Confederacy—totems of a 150-year campaign to historically reimagine the meaning of the Civil War. The years from 1890 to 1920 marked the high point of this campaign, led by the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the Sons of Confederate Veterans, and other groups which today protest “heritage violations” of their ongoing program of public commemoration. And they have not lost: Confederate revisionism, in the soft form of preservationism, as opposed to the blunt-force tactics of rallies and protests, is now the provenance of local, state, and even federal governments.

Two weeks after the Confederate battle flag was removed from statehouse grounds in Columbia, South Carolina, in July 2015, the North Carolina General Assembly passed a law protecting “monuments and memorials commemorating events, persons, and military service in North Carolina history.” Despite the apparent catholicity of its protections, the Cultural History Artifact Management and Patriotism Act was clearly aimed at granting asylum to Confederate monuments and memorials around the state, based on the notion that, as its proponents argued, to remove them from courthouse lawns and university quadrangles would be to “erase history.” The flag episode in Columbia was a catalyst for a storm of neo-Confederate protest, which intensified during the 2016 election cycle and came to a head at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in 2017. The sharp reaction against the Charlottesville rally did not mean that all was lost for the Lost Cause. Far from it.

In December 2018, the Smithsonian Institution found that taxpayers had contributed over \$40 million to the preservations of Confederate sites. The Department of Veterans Affairs, a federal agency, spends millions of dollars each year in order to secure Confederate cemeteries in Virginia, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency contributes thousands for “protective measures” for Jefferson Davis’s former home in Biloxi, Mississippi.

Federal curacy of Confederate burial grounds is not a new phenomenon: it goes back at least to 1900, when a couple hundred Confederate soldiers were reinterred in Arlington National Cemetery. Within 15 years, President Woodrow Wilson was at the site to dedicate a monument to the Confederate dead, confident the nation was ready to put behind it the “fraternal misunderstandings” that led to war. By the end of World War I, the specious history of the Lost Cause had become a popular fiction serviceable for advancing the military and political interests of white Americans both at home and overseas. A hundred years later, the federal government would be

paying to protect memorials to honor people it had once regarded as treasonous. It was a stunning if slow-moving turnabout: a version of history that could objectively be called white supremacist propaganda now has legal protection from the government against whose authority the patrons of that mythology originally revolted.

Propping up an illusory history has a price, and not just on balance sheets. The human cost of such self-deception is the subject of an early and little-known story by Flannery O'Connor, "A Late Encounter with the Enemy." Originally published in *Harper's Bazaar* in 1953 and included in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* two years later, the story is about the ways in which the burdens of history, when honestly confronted, can bring not enlightenment but devastation.

"Late Encounter" is barely ten pages in the Library of America edition. It is hardly one of her major works (O'Connor described it as "not so bad"), and it rarely figures in critical studies of her work. But it is notable for being the only piece of her fiction that directly treats the Civil War and its legacy. The story is only superficially about the war, though; it is really about the way in which the war is—or is not—remembered. It is a story about memory and the deep conflict between public commemoration, sectarian mythology, and historical reality.

"Late Encounter" is structurally simple: there is a single main scene framing one flashback. Sally Poker Sash is about to attend her college graduation, the joyful fruit of a protracted education spread out over 20 summers while she was teaching school. It's such a big deal that she has invited her 104-year-old grandfather, a Confederate veteran, to attend in full military dress. Sally arranges for him to sit up on stage—not so that he will have a good view of the proceedings but because she wants him to be seen: "she wanted to show what she stood for, or, as she said, 'what all was behind her,' and was not behind them. This them was not anybody in particular. It was just all the upstarts who had turned the world on its head and unsettled the ways of decent living." She wants the crowd to see him, and herself through him—"Glorious upright old man stand-in for the old traditions! Dignity! Honor! Courage!"—as a rebuke to their wanton ways.

It's not hard to hear in this passage the ways in which O'Connor herself wrestled with the tension between the traditions of white Southern society and the expanding movement for rights for African Americans. O'Connor was hardly a radical integrationist and was not innocent of racist prejudice. She was often condescending

toward blacks and—in 1952 at least—could not honestly be called a diligent student of racial equality and the traditions of African American literature.

On the other hand, her work often gestures beyond the narrow racial imaginary of Georgia in the 1950s, and at its most cutting and poignant it ruthlessly undermines the heritage of white supremacy and the mythologies that support it. Her most powerful stories, such as “Revelation,” include a radical vision of the kingdom of God and a savage and hilarious mockery of white pieties.

“Late Encounter” is one of these stories. It offers a brief but profound meditation on the debilitating nature of selective memory, the personal and public costs of self-serving falsehoods, and indifference to the past. This indifference is concentrated into “five feet four inches of pure game cock,” General Tennessee Flintlock Sash of the Confederacy. Sally Sash is aware that her grandfather had not actually been a general at all. The general himself neither knows nor cares what he is or was: “He had probably been a foot soldier; he didn’t remember what he had been; in fact, he didn’t remember that war at all.” The memory of the war is like a dead appendage that does and does not belong to him:

It was like his feet, which hung down now shriveled at the very end of him, without feeling, covered with a blue-gray afghan that Sally Poker had crocheted when she was a little girl. He didn’t remember the Spanish-American War in which he had lost a son; he didn’t even remember the son. He didn’t have any use for history because he never expected to meet it again. To his mind, history was connected with processions and life with parades and he liked parades.

General Sash prefers “parades with floats full of Miss Americas and Miss Daytona Beaches and Miss Queen Cotton Products” to processions, especially “dreary black” ones with their interminable obsession with the past.

The only episode from the past that General Sash bothers to hang on to is “that preemy they had in Atlanta” 12 years earlier, when he was first given the general’s uniform. The event alluded to is the official premiere of *Gone with the Wind* in Atlanta on December 15, 1939, attended by Clark Gable, Vivien Leigh, and a starstruck Margaret Mitchell. Seated next to glammed-up Hollywood stars and starlets that night, the *Atlanta Constitution* reported, were four men in their nineties “in freshly pressed, be-medalled grey uniforms. They sat alone, huddled in

companionable silence, lost in thoughts brought back sharply by the raw scenes of a ravished Georgia countryside.”

O’Connor makes the scene even more theatrical: before the picture, General Sash is trotted out before the gala audience, a Hollywood “gul” on each arm. In describing the way Sash is “lent” to the city museum every Confederate Memorial Day, O’Connor’s language is cinematic: Sash is like a stage prop intended to “lend atmosphere to the scene.” Sash is a totem of public memory, drained of life to the degree to which he is indifferent to the past.

As O’Connor tells it, when General Sash made his entrance into the theater, members of the United Daughters of the Confederacy began to clap, and later they “rose as a group and did not sit down again until the general was on the stage.” O’Connor is slyly mocking the overtly religious groupthink of the UDC, which acts almost automatically, as if with a single mind. When his moment has passed, the general is whisked off stage and back to his seat, where he sleeps through the entire movie.

On the stage for his granddaughter’s graduation, the general is in a different mood. He is attended to by Sally’s nephew, John Wesley Poker Sash—“a fat blond boy of ten with an executive expression”—and they make quite a pair, the general in his “courageous gray” and the “clean” young blond boy in his Scout khakis. The neutral colors of white Southern memory—blond, grey, khaki—are bland, flat, and dull but loaded with historical symbolism: a visual convergence of the grey of Confederate soldiers and the tan of Nazi brownshirts. Together they are threatened by the “black procession” that winds its way across the campus and into the auditorium. It is a reprise of the movie premiere a dozen years earlier, but this time the scene is framed not in terms of entertainment but of education: “The graduates in their heavy robes looked as if the last beads of ignorance were being sweated out of them.”

O’Connor repeats the word *black* over and over again as General Sash sits on the stage watching the black procession relentlessly pressing toward him and forming a “black pool” in front of him. The general has the sensation of a tiny hole opening up in his skull and of knowledge being poured into it against his will. At the beginning of the ceremony itself, a “black figure” begins “telling something about history and the General made up his mind he wouldn’t listen, but the words kept seeping through the little hole in his head.”

The words come on all the same, bearing down on and into Sash. He tries to resist. “He had forgotten history and he didn’t intend to remember it. He had forgotten the name and face of his wife and the names and faces of his children or even if he had a wife and children, and he had forgotten the names of places and the places themselves and what had happened at them.”

Along with the “slow black music” of the graduation ceremony, names keep coming in a relentless march: Chickamauga, Shiloh, Johnston, Lee. General Sash tries to shore himself against the onslaught of historical particularity by summoning up again the memory of the premiere in Atlanta, the city that for O’Connor represents fake history, collective memory as processed by Disney and Hollywood. Like the black procession itself, the words continue to press toward him.

“Dammit!” he thinks to himself, “I ain’t going to have it!” Against the encroaching tidal wave of blackness—the “figure in the black robe,” the “black pool in front of him,” the “black slow music”—the artificiality of Sash’s memory begins frantically to retreat, then to yield. The unacknowledged hellhound on his trail, the reality of history begins to crash upon him: “He recognized it, for it had been dogging all his days. He made such a desperate effort to see over it and find out what comes after the past that his hand clenched the sword until the blade touched bone.”

Ultimately the contest in “Late Encounter” is between the soothing, mythologized version of history we wish to remember and the ugly reality that we cannot ignore. The general’s recognition of his own complicity in real history—and the implicit costs of Lost Cause mythology in contributing to the disfranchisement of African Americans—is overpowering. When Sally crosses the stage she sees her grandfather “sitting fixed and fierce, his eyes wide open.” Historical truth has brought Sash to a kind of new awareness—but it has also cost him his life. Sally mistakes his wide-eyed expression for grandfatherly pride, but in fact it is the death-stare of an existential scouring, a religious encounter with truth’s violent steamrolling of pious falsehood.

Sally Poker is not alone in mistaking an expression of horror for one of adulation. Americans in general have excelled at this sort of category error, and while the Lost Cause represents the most prominent contemporary example of a fake history that still survives under the guise of a story of heroic resistance, the phenomenon is not limited to Lost Causers.

What if history is not at all the way we prefer to remember it? Could it be that monuments—not just public ones but also those our own personal histories are made of—are tokens of a tacit agreement to forget certain difficult truths? Directed both generally at an inveterate human skill for self-deception and specifically at the mythology of the Lost Cause, the question that O'Connor's "Late Encounter" puts to the reader is both blunt and surgical: What if you are wrong about what it is you think you were fighting for?

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