

Long-Legged Yankee Lies : The Lost Cause Textbook Crusade

WOODROW WILSON WAS THE FIRST native-born Southerner to be elected president (in 1912) since Zachary Taylor in 1848. On July 4, 1913, Wilson had been in office exactly four months when he addressed a huge reunion of Union and Confederate veterans who had come to Gettysburg to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of that Civil War battle. "How wholesome and healing the peace has been!" Wilson exulted. "We have found one another again as brothers and comrades, in arms, enemies no longer, generous friends rather, our battles long past, the *quarrel forgotten*." The spirit of this joint reunion of Blue and Gray was captured by a photograph of septuagenarian Confederate veterans shaking hands with their Union counterparts across the stone wall where so much death had occurred fifty years earlier at the climax of Pickett's Charge.

This reconciliation of once-bitter enemies was achieved at the cost of justice to the freed slaves and their descendants. Flush with victory in 1865 and determined to secure "the fruits of victory" by planting Yankee institutions and values in the conquered South and empowering black freedpeople in the domain once ruled by the planter class, the Northern people within a generation had yielded the field to the guardians of white supremacy and Confederate memory. The custodians of that memory won their postwar battle to celebrate the South's Lost Cause as a valiant crusade for constitutional liberties and state's rights that was overwhelmed only by brute force. Slavery had little to do with causing the war, in this version of history, and reconciliation of the two sections that had fought a "brothers' war" was a more important consequence than the abolition of slavery. The federal government and the Northern people had long since conceded the power to define race relations in the South to whites, who had proceeded to impose a rigid system of segregation and disfranchisement on black people.

In 1865 Edward Pollard, editor of the *Richmond Examiner* during the Civil War, published a book titled *The Lost Cause: A New Southern History of the War of the Confederates*, and two years later followed it with a second volume titled *The Lost Cause Regained*. These books foreshadowed most of the themes now associated with what many historians describe as "the myth of the Lost Cause." In this use, the word "myth" is not synonymous with "falsehood" (though it may incorporate many untruths) but rather to be understood in its anthropological meaning as the collective memory of a people about their past, which sustains a belief system that shapes their view of the world in which they live.

The Lost Cause myth helped Southern whites deal with the shattering reality of catastrophic defeat and impoverishment in a war they had been sure they would win. They emerged from the war subdued but unrepentant; they had lost all save honor, and their unsullied honor became the foundation of the myth. Having (in their own view) outfought the Yankees, they were eventually ground down by "overwhelming numbers and resources," as Robert E. Lee told his grieving soldiers at Appomattox. This theme was echoed down the years in Southern memoirs, at reunions of Confederate veterans, and by heritage groups like the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Sons of

Confederate Veterans. “Genius and valor went down before brute force,” declared a Georgia veteran in 1890. The Confederacy “had surrendered but was never whipped.” Robert E. Lee was the war’s foremost general, indeed, the greatest commander in American history, while Ulysses S. Grant was a mere bludgeoner whose army overcame its more skilled and courageous adversary only because of those overwhelming numbers and resources.

Not only did Confederate soldiers fight better; they also fought for a noble cause, the cause of state’s rights, constitutional liberty, and consent of the governed. Slavery had nothing to do with it. “Think of it, soldiers of Lee!” declared a speaker at a reunion of the United Confederate Veterans in 1904. “You were fighting, they say, for the privilege of holding your fellow man in bondage! Will you for one moment acknowledge the truth of that indictment? Oh, no! That banner of the Southern Cross was studded with the stars of God’s heaven.... You could not have followed a banner that was not a banner of liberty!”

Similar rhetoric poured forth at the dedications of hundreds of monuments to Confederate soldiers and their commanders planted on courthouse lawns and other public spaces across the South. If the Confederacy had raised proportionately as many soldiers as the postwar South raised monuments, it might not have succumbed to “overwhelming numbers.” White children played a conspicuous part in these monument-unveiling ceremonies, so that the rising generation with no personal memories of the war would understand the heroism of their fathers. The climactic such event occurred in 1907 when three thousand children pulled a large wagon containing the statue of Jefferson Davis through two miles of cheering spectators to the site of the colossal Davis memorial on Monument Avenue in Richmond. According to an observer, the children hauled on “two lines of rope over seven hundred feet in length.” In recognition of their sacred effort, “souvenir pieces of rope will be kept in their homes by many of the children through the years of the future.”

Children were ubiquitous at parades, rallies, and reunions of veterans and heritage groups. Indeed, the very names of the United Daughters of the Confederacy and Sons of Confederate Veterans expressed a determination to keep the Confederate heritage alive among the children of those who fought the war. Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin, born in Georgia as the youngest child of a Confederate veteran, remembered her first attendance at a United Confederate Veterans (UCV) reunion in 1903. The speeches made a great impression on the six-year-old girl, who recalled the occasion a half century later: “Even a child liked to listen, punctuated as they were every few moments with excited handclapping, cheers, stamping of feet, music. And such great men, “including an Episcopal bishop who was a Confederate veteran.” Who there would not feel his Lost Cause blessed when so noble a man could tell them, We all hold it to be one of the noblest chapters in our history...”

Lumpkin’s father was an officer in the UCV. He took her to many meetings during which she heard him exhort his colleagues to “educate the children!... Men of the South let your children hear the old stories of the South; let them hear them by the

fireside, in the schoolroom, everywhere, and they will preserve inviolate the sacred honor of the South.” He practiced at home what he preached in public. All the time she was growing up, Lumpkin heard heroic tales of the war. One of her favorite memories was of formal debates that her parents organized among the children. These "debates" somehow always seemed to come out the same way, however, for she remembered "how the plaster walls of our parlor rang with tales of the South's sufferings, exhortations to uphold her honor, recitals of her humanitarian slave regime... and, ever and always, persuasive logic for her position of States Rights.."

Lumpkin’s father relied on more than oral tradition. He “was ever in search of books to nurture us;” she wrote. “One new set, I can recall, had, to be sure, lives of Lee and Jackson, but to our dismay also brought a life of Grant. We children were especially indignant at this affront,” so her sister “snatched the Grant book away to hurl it into the woodshed as ignominious trash.”

Lumpkin’s parents were carrying out the injunction of Sumner A. Cunningham, founder and editor of *Confederate Veteran Magazine*, to create “living monuments” to Southern heroism. In 1909, at the close of a decade in which as many stone or bronze monuments had been dedicated as in all other decades combined, Cunningham noted with sadness that “year by year the ranks of the Confederate veterans are thinning; rapidly, the mothers of the cause are falling into their last sleep, and the time will be, only too soon, when at no convention, no meeting will there be left any who witnessed the great and wonderful struggle for liberty.” Statues of Confederate soldiers were, of course, necessary to preserve the memory of this struggle, wrote Cunningham, but “shall no living monuments record the gallant dead?” The children and grandchildren of veterans must be these living monuments. “Let auxiliaries be formed of the eager children. In their fertile minds now is the time of planting if a harvest is to be reaped.”

In a grim reminder of those thinning ranks, the National Casket Company had become one of the principal advertisers in *Confederate Veteran Magazine*. This company entered the winning float in a Southern heritage parade in 1908. Two teenagers, one dressed as a Confederate officer and the other as a plantation belle, stood on the float next to a casket atop a large funeral bier with the inscription “Your Sons and Daughters will forever guard the memory of your brave deeds.”

Confederate veterans and their wives had been aware of the need for living monuments well before Cunningham’s editorial and the National Casket float. Soon after its founding in 1895, the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) began to organize children’s auxiliaries, most of which were named, appropriately, Children of the Confederacy. Their purpose, according to a UDC member, was “telling the Truth to Children.” The “nobleness, the chivalry, the self-denial, the bravery, and the tireless endurance of the Confederate soldier should be instilled into every Southern child.”

The adult leaders of the Children of the Confederacy came up with several creative ways to accomplish this goal. One of the most effective was an “educational game” with fifty-two playing cards bearing portraits of Confederate officers and political

leaders, the names of Confederate states and victorious battles (with the definition of Confederate victories stretched a bit), and descriptions of other notable events. Called "The Game of Confederate Heroes," this pastime was a big hit. One woman who often played it with her children commented, "I always feel like weeping when I draw Robert E. Lee, The Stars and Bars, and The Cruise of the Shenandoah. I find this an easy way of familiarizing the children with precious moments, and they all love to play the game..."

Another tactic was to have children recite poetry or speeches, supposedly of their own composition, on ceremonial occasions. At a reception in Charleston for Mary Custis Lee, General Robert E. Lee's daughter, the last of several children's speeches was offered by the youngest orator, seven-year-old B. William Walker, grandson of a Confederate general. Walker concluded with these words: Robert E. Lee "was a grand man. He loved God, and loved his country [which country was not specified], he loved all that was good and noble.... The name of Robert E. Lee will never die. It is written in history and the book of Life, and will live for ever." Mary Lee was so moved by Walker's eloquence that she swept him up in her arms and kissed him. His response was not recorded.

Alas, a serpent lurked in this Confederate Garden of Eden. The decades flanking 1900 were a period of expansion for public education at what we would today call the middle school and high school levels. Before this time, U.S. history had been part of the curriculum only in an occasional, unsystematic way. But by the 1890s the professionalization of history at the university level had come of age, and American history entered the curriculum in secondary schools. Publishers scrambled to produce textbooks for this new market. Most of their authors and nearly all of their publishers were located in the North—the publishers of nine out of the ten leading U.S. history textbooks before 1900, according to one student of the subject. Their point of view tended to reflect the triumphant nationalism growing out of Union victory in the Civil War.

Here was the serpent in the garden, warned Confederate veterans: Yankee textbooks introducing innocent Southern children to the knowledge of good and evil—mostly Northern good and Southern evil. The shocked chaplain general of the UCV reported that such books caused many Southern youths to "think that we fought for slavery.... This is really pathetic," for if schoolbooks continued to "fasten upon the South the stigma of slavery and that we fought for it... the Southern soldier will go down in history dishonored." This was only one of the "long-legged Yankee lies" in Northern books that invaded Southern homes, schools, libraries, bookstores, and newsstands with "a horde of war literature so erroneous in statement of principle and fact... as to require on [our] part an immediate defense of [our] reputation by a prompt refutation of the errors thus widely sown in the minds of [our] children."

As they had done in 1861, Southerners mobilized to repel this invasion. A principal motive for the UDC's founding was to counter this "false history;" which taught Southern children "that their fathers were not only rebels but guilty of almost every crime enumerated in the decalogue.... One of our main objects has been to put into the hands of our children a correct history.." Both the UDC and UCV formed "Historical

Committees" with the twofold purpose to "select and designate such proper and truthful history of the United States, to be used in both public and private schools of the South" and to "put the seal of their condemnation upon such as are not truthful histories."

Having found such unsatisfactory books, the committees should "enter into friendly correspondence with the authors and publishers of such books, with a view to correcting such errors, or supplying such omissions." This friendly correspondence should urge authors to make clear that "the cause we fought for and our brothers died for was the cause of civil liberty" and that Confederates were "a chivalric, intelligent, proud, liberty-loving people" who contended for "the most sacred rights of self-government" against "the clamor of a majority overriding the Constitution and demanding terms so revolting to our sense of justice" as to be intolerable.

Although the Grand Army of the Republic, the Union veterans' organization, also formed committees to promote its version of the war, the UCV and UDC committees were more determined, uncompromising, and persistent. "Friendly correspondence" with Northern publishers had some results. Some publishers issued revised editions of their U.S. history textbooks in an effort to meet Southern criteria. Others put out separate editions for the Southern market.

But for most UCV and UDC history committees, these efforts were unsatisfactory. The books were still written by Yankees, "who are inimical to us, and who have permitted just enough of the truth to creep into their pages to make the lies stick and to place the Confederate soldier, as well as our entire people, in a false light before the world."

Friendly correspondence having proved inadequate, the UCV vowed to "do everything in its power to encourage the preparation of suitable school histories and especially to encourage their publication by the building up of Southern publishing houses." This enterprise enjoyed considerable success. In 1895 the preeminent Southern educator Jabez L. M. Curry compiled a textbook titled *The Southern States of the American Union*, published in Richmond. Unlike Northern books, which tended to "consign the South to infamy," wrote Curry in the introduction, his book demonstrated that the South was "rich in patriotism, in intellectual force, in civil and military achievements, in heroism, in honorable and sagacious statesmanship." Here was history as it should be written.

Equally exemplary was *A School History of the United States*, first published in 1895, also in Richmond, written by a Virginian whose name announced her credentials: Susan Pendleton Lee. The abolitionists had branded slavery "a moral wrong," she wrote, but the Southern people knew that "the evils connected with it were less than those of any other system of labor. Hundreds of thousands of African savages had been Christianized under its influence—the kindest relations existed between [the slaves] and their owners.... The slaves were better off than any other menial class in the world." As for the Ku Klux Klan during Reconstruction, it was necessary "for self-protection against... outrages committed by midguided negroes."

Armed with the increasing availability of these and several other textbooks by Southern authors, UCV and UDC committees met with local school boards and administrators to press them to get rid of books that contained long-legged Yankee lies and substitute approved books by Southern writers. The UCV was a powerful lobby in Southern politics, and the UDC enjoyed great prestige in Southern communities. Many school principals and school board members were Confederate veterans or the sons of veterans. The crusade to purge Yankee lies from the schools achieved great success. As early as 1902 *Confederate Veteran Magazine* ran an exultant headline: "False Histories Ousted in Texas." In South Carolina the UCV history committee got a bill introduced in the legislature to ban any "partial or partisan or unfair or untrue book" from every school in the state and to punish anyone who assigned such a book with a \$500 fine or one year's imprisonment. The bill did not pass, but school boards and teachers got the message. By 1905 a UCV leader in South Carolina could congratulate his colleagues that "the most pernicious histories have been banished from the school rooms."

Other Southern states were not far behind. In 1904 the Mississippi legislature enacted a law requiring the state textbook commission to choose a uniform series of texts in which "no history in relation to the late civil war between the states shall be used in this state unless it be fair and impartial." Similar laws appeared elsewhere. At least two states, North Carolina and Florida, appropriated funds to subsidize the production of "a Correct History of the United States, Including a True and Correct History of the Confederacy," in the words of Florida's law. Nearly all Southern states created state textbook commissions to prescribe texts for all public schools instead of leaving the choice up to local school systems, as most Northern states did—an interesting application of the state sovereignty these same textbooks maintained that the Confederacy stood for. Whether intended or not, one effect of this pattern of statewide adoptions was to compel national publishers to eliminate anything offensive to the South to avoid a state or regional boycott of their books.

By 1910 the historical committee of the UCV expressed satisfaction with the results of its textbook crusade. "We do not fear the bookmaker now;" the committee reported. "Southern schools and Southern teachers have prepared books which Southern children may read without insult or traduction of their fathers. Printing presses all over the Southland—and all over the Northland are sending forth by thousands ones which tell the true character of the heroic struggle. The influence... of the South forbid[s] longer the perversion of truth and the falsification of history."

The serpent had been banished from textbooks but still lingered in trade and reference books that might find their way into the hands of innocent youth. The UCV and UDC led a charge against placing in public and school libraries such works, "which are unkind and unfair to the South, which belittle our achievement, impugn our motives and malign the character of our illustrious leaders." Several state and local chapters formed committees to "recommend to the proper authorities the elimination of any books inculcating false history from libraries." One target of these committees was the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, which contained an article stating that slavery was exploitative

rather than paternal and another maintaining that secession was revolutionary rather than constitutional. "Such a distortion of historical facts;" bristled the UCV historical committee, "could emanate only from ignorance or malignity."

No book or author was either too important and powerful or too marginal and obscure to escape the censure of UCV and UDC watchdogs. Two examples come from 1911. A Confederate veteran happened that year to read Woodrow Wilson's *History of the American People*. In a brief reference to the famous naval battle between the USS *Monitor* and the CSS *Virginia (Merrimac)*, Wilson wrote that the Monitor won the showdown. The outraged veteran fired off a letter of protest to Wilson and sent copies to Southern newspapers, which gave it wide publicity. "If this is the way a Virginia born historian writes her history, may God spare us from another such," he told Wilson, who was then governor of New Jersey and soon to run for president of the United States. "When one born of our own soil speaks untruthful history, it cuts deeper and makes a more insidious wound" than the "flaming slanders" of Yankee historians, who everyone knew were full of "overloaded prejudice and ignorance." A chastened Wilson wrote a letter of apology on the official stationery of the New Jersey executive mansion, expressing himself "very much mortified" by his mistake. Wilson's letter was also widely printed in the Southern press.

While this exchange was taking place, a UCV committee discovered in a fourth-grade reader used in South Carolina schools a poem entitled "The Old Sergeant;" which included a line describing the Confederate army as a "dark, rebellious host." Using the tactics of friendly correspondence, the UCV persuaded the Northern publisher, D. C. Heath, to replace the poem with the biblical story of Ruth, which the UCV found acceptable.

If friendly correspondence and political activism by adults failed to purge false history, students themselves might take direct action. In 1894 a student in a Tennessee grammar school told her teacher (as a speaker at a UCV reunion described the incident) that "she didn't intend to study Mr. Higginson's history any more, that she had burnt her book up, for it made the Yankees win all the battles." The other little girls in the class who were the daughters of the old soldiers burnt their books, too. Southern newspapers applauded this action; UCV camps passed resolutions of approval; and from Arkansas came a petition bearing five hundred signatures commending the girls, who "dared to take the first step toward writing a history that would do justice to the South."

Two decades later the "historian general" of the UDC, Mildred L. Rutherford, who also described herself as the official state historian of Georgia, recounted an incident that occurred at an unnamed Southern college. The U.S. history text used there portrayed Jefferson Davis in an unflattering light. As Rutherford depicted it, the students "sent a committee to the teacher to request that the textbook be changed." The teacher refused. The students then went to the college president, who backed the teacher. The trustees declined to interfere. So, in Rutherford's words, the students "kindled a bonfire on the campus and into it every copy of that history was thrown." Rutherford commended their action and added that "the authorities were taught a lesson."

As this incident suggests, while Confederate organizations had won the victory for true history in Southern public schools by the 1910s, private schools and colleges might still harbor Yankee textbooks. Therefore the UCV and UDC could not rest on their oars. Rutherford made this point explicit in her address to the first UDC convention held outside the South, in San Francisco in 1916. She claimed that 81 percent of Southern private schools "use histories which misrepresent the south."

What this meant is unclear, for Rutherford's definition of "misrepresentation" was singular and her use of facts was loose. Nevertheless, as historian general of the UDC she led a crusade to expand the surveillance by historical committees to shape up private institutions and prevent backsliding by public ones. In 1919 Rutherford published *A Measuring Rod to Test Text Books and Reference Books in Schools, Colleges, and Libraries*. The UCV adopted this measuring rod as a set of criteria for "all authorities charged with the selection of text-books for colleges, schools, and all scholastic institutions" and requested "all library authorities in the southern States" to "mark all books in their collections which do not come up to the same measure, on the title page thereof, Unjust to the South."

Here are some of Rutherford's instructions to teachers and librarians:

- Reject a book that speaks of the Constitution other than [as] a compact between Sovereign States.
- Reject a text-book that... does not clearly outline the interferences with the rights guaranteed to the South by the Constitution, and which caused secession....
- Reject a book that says the South fought to hold her slaves.
- Reject a book that speaks of the slaveholder of the South as cruel and unjust to his slaves.
- Reject a text-book that glorifies Abraham Lincoln and vilifies Jefferson Davis.
- Reject a text-book that omits to tell of the South's heroes and their deeds.

The UDC and the UCV also tirelessly promoted what Rutherford called the "Truths of History" in another of her pamphlets, in which she promised to present "a fair, unbiased, impartial, unprejudiced and Conscientious Study of History." Above all, she insisted, the historian must get her facts right, for the South had suffered from false history. Here are some examples of her facts, culled from many of similar purport:

- "Southern men were anxious for the slaves to be free. They were studying earnestly the problems of freedom, when Northern fanatical Abolitionists took matters in their own hands."
- More slaveholders and sons of slaveholders fought for the Union than for the Confederacy (this fit awkwardly with assertions elsewhere that the Yankees got immigrants and blacks to do most of their fighting).
- "Gen. Lee freed his slaves before the war began and Gen. Ulysses S. Grant did not free his until the war ended."

“The war did not begin with the firing on Fort Sumter. It began when Lincoln ordered 2, 400 men and 285 guns to the defense of Sumter.”

Union forces outnumbered Confederate forces five to one, not surprising when the Union population was thirty-one million while the Confederate population was only five million whites and four million slaves.

Finally, Rutherford took great pains to describe Lincoln as a crude, vulgar, cynical tyrant who violated the Constitution at every opportunity. To support her portrait of Lincoln, she quoted James Ford Rhodes, perhaps the most influential Civil War historian of the time: Lincoln's “Emancipation Proclamation was not issued from a humane standpoint. He hoped it would incite the negroes to rise against the women and children. His Emancipation Proclamation was intended only as a punishment for the seceding States.”

It mattered little to Rutherford's avid readers that this supposed Rhodes quotation was a total fabrication, or that every one of her "facts" and "truths" cited above was false. She was enormously influential in Southern education as well as in the UDC. Many of her "truths" found their way into approved Southern history textbooks, at least those below the college level.

The discipline of history in Southern colleges partook to some degree in the professionalization occurring at the national level in the early twentieth century. Higher education, therefore, proved a tougher nut for neo-Confederates to crack, but crack it they did. As early as 1902 Professor William E. Dodd of Randolph-Macon College, who was a native of North Carolina and one of the few Southern liberals of his time, complained that Confederate veterans had imposed a straitjacket of censorship by requiring courses in American history to teach that "the South was altogether right in seceding from the Union" and "that the war was not waged about the negro." No serious scholarship was possible, wrote Dodd, "when such a confession of faith is made a sine qua non of fitness for teaching or writing history."

Some professional historians who gave lip service to academic freedom, however, were not above taking advantage of this climate of opinion. Professor Franklin L. Riley of the University of Mississippi, author of a U.S. history textbook, publicly championed what the profession in those days called "scientific history." But he privately told his agent to "hammer" a competing textbook in an Arkansas adoption struggle because the competitor gave more attention to Lincoln than to Davis and "devotes nearly 27 pages to 'the heroes who saved the Union' and only 7 pages... to only one Southern hero of the War—General Robert E. Lee."

The cause célèbre in the college textbook wars began at Virginia's Roanoke College in 1910. A professor of history there, Herman J. Thorstenberg, a Northern-horn son of Swedish immigrants, assigned Henry W. Elson's popular *History of the United States* as a textbook. A student whose father happened to be Confederate veteran as well as a local judge and a member of the college's board of trustees protested the book's treatment of the South and refused to attend class. Her father backed her up, brought the

situation before the board, and publicized it in the local newspaper. From there it spread all over the South as the press and Confederate organizations seized upon the issue.

Not only was Elson a Yankee (from Ohio); he also had the temerity to suggest that Lincoln was a better man than Davis. Far worse was his treatment of the antebellum South, slavery, and the sectional conflict. Although he appeared to be evenhanded, holding Northern extremists like Charles Sumner and John Brown equally responsible with Southern fire-eaters for polarizing the sections, this apportionment of blame was unacceptable. Even more so was Elson's conclusion that the slavery issue was the main factor in provoking secession and war, which he called the "slaveholders' rebellion." Worst of all were two passages in which Elson quoted a sister of President James Madison, who had said that although "Southern ladies were complimented with the name of wife, they were only the mistresses of seraglios;" and quoted another Southern woman who told Harriet Martineau that "the wife of many a planter was but the chief slave of his harem."

The uproar over this affair went on for almost two years. Citizens in Roanoke and in the nearby town of Salem, where the college was located, threatened mob violence against Thorstenberg and the college. The *Roanoke Times* thundered: "We would like to see a fire kindled on the campus and every copy of the book formally and carefully committed to the flames." The same newspaper later declared that "we had better have poison put into the food of our sons [and daughters] than to have them taught that their forefathers were heads of harems... and that the soldiers of the Confederacy fought to maintain human slavery." The editor of *Confederate Veteran Magazine* endorsed the determination of local citizens to "abolish their most cherished institution rather than tolerate such a book." UCV and UDC chapters all over the South took a position similar to the one expressed by the president of the Maryland UDC: "No history should be admitted into any school of the South until every sentence and word has been carefully scrutinized by competent and faithful Southern men, and the teacher who would commend such a book should be dismissed and advised that another climate would be conducive to his health.

Although the faculty and president of Roanoke College offered a weak defense of academic freedom, the matter became moot when Thorstenberg caved in to pressure from the board of trustees to stop using Elson's text. Meanwhile, UDC and UCV chapters discovered that the book was also used in several other Southern colleges, including the state universities of North Carolina, South Carolina, and Texas. But UDC leaders in those states soon reported "with great pleasure" that the book had been "discontinued" at these and other institutions. The following year a UCV officer in Tennessee gave the book a careful reading and discovered another problem: Although it was "tinged with some make-believe of affection for the whites of the South, yet [it has] an uncontrollable love for the colored race and a desire upon the author's part, though unexpressed, to place them in every particular upon terms of equality with the better class of whites of the South."

The UCV need not have worried that this unexpressed desire would continue to corrupt Southern youth. By the time Woodrow Wilson entered the White House in 1913, Elson's text had disappeared from Southern schools, along with any others that departed from the line laid down by the UCV and the UDC. The Lost Cause triumphed in the curriculum, if not on the battlefield. A North Carolinian educated in that state during the 1920s who later left the South and eventually became dean of Yale Divinity School looked back on the books he had read in school: "I never could understand how our Confederate troops could have won every battle in the War so decisively and then have lost the war itself!"

Neo-Confederate historical committees had done their work well. Nevertheless, the crusade could not end. Eternal vigilance was still the price of true history. Few members of the UCV remained by 1932, the last year of publication of Confederate Veteran Magazine. But the UDC and the Sons of Confederate Veterans remained vigilant. The Virginia chapter of the UDC expressed "shock" that year at the news that David Muzzey's all-time best seller among high school American history textbooks, described by the UDC as "atrocious" in its treatment of the South, had somehow been adopted by the Virginia textbook commission to replace a book by a native Virginian. The Sons of Confederate Veterans issued a "Call to Arms" to overturn this decision and return to "the purity of our history." That quest for purity remains vital today, as any historian working in the field can testify.

James M. McPherson

This Mighty Scourge: Perspectives on the Civil War

Oxford University Press

Used with permission.