MONUMENT AND MEMORIAL

The East Coast has been settled for many generations, and histories of settlement – let alone preceding Native American histories – are often hidden or multi-layered. Monuments claim the significance of particular characters or stories, often contributing to sidelining complexities. War memorials are especially remarkable: they celebrate that which is actually horrendous, and canonise the deaths of individuals without reminders of the effects of such losses on community and family. The realities of war cannot be fully acknowledged, if only for fear of deterring future support, so heroism becomes idealised. Gettysburg offers one such example. Now a national monument, with paths and signposts directing visitors to statues of particular military leaders or regiments, the bloodiness of the battleground has been sanitised, and heroes created. Gettysburg stands for the ideal that all ‘men’ are created equal, which in principle is central to the US constitution (although in practice some men seem more equal than others, and women still face struggles for inclusion).

The American Civil War played a key role in the establishment of democratic principles of freedom; it is one of a number of defining
moments in the constitution of the United States, then still largely rural. The war focused on slavery and was triggered by the 1860 election of abolitionist Abraham Lincoln as President. Questions of self-determination were thus key to this struggle, both for plantation workers as individuals, and for the Southern States which together had formed the secessionist Confederacy. Underpinning the conflict for the South was the economic question of how to maintain the profitability of estates without slave labour; for plantation owners and those involved in related economic activities (transportation, shops and commerce) the war concerned defence of territory, culture and lifestyle.

The American Civil War was also among the first wars to be photographed. We might now take the presence of photojournalists for granted, and be cynical about the types of image shown. But photographers then, including Matthew Brady (1823–96) and Timothy O’Sullivan (1840–82), were contributing to founding a genre, taking their darkroom carts into danger zones and confronting the pain and death of others. The war was also the first occasion of military conscription (on both sides); most soldiers were farmers with no professional army training and no previous experience of battlefield-scale combat. As photographer, John Huddleston, suggests,

The experience of the Civil War shaped the self-reliant nature of the American into a character more amenable to serving in large, hierarchic institutions. Total war spawned powerful, national systems of government, transportation, and industry that operated under centralized control, replacing former localized and individual power bases. When the war began, states issued their own paper currency: citizens and militias owed their allegiance to states. By war’s end both North and South had a national paper currency, a national definition of citizenship, and national conscription. The national military organisations served as models for large corporate structures of the future. Primary resistance to this capitalist growth had come from Southern agrarianism. The South was destroyed, and the Northern ideal of the independent craftsman, businessman, or farmer was eroded in the process of trying to assert it. Hierarchy, subordination, and obedience to political and economic institutions became the new American way.

The steamboat, the railway, newspapers, and the telegraph enabled the United States to maintain an evolving unity.

(Huddleston, 2002: 5)
Huddleston also comments that, for Black people, the war was about slavery right from the start, but that few others would have noted this as a motive for fighting. Racist attitudes were as endemic in the North as in the South, and it was only in the second year of the war that emancipation was formally incorporated into Union objectives.

Huddleston's concern is with the legacy of the Civil War for the American landscape; specifically, ways in which it is irrevocably marked in the land. He notes physical changes to vistas where trenches were dug, earthwork fortifications were built, or scorched-earth tactics left a permanent mark. He also asks whether the muted reds of the soil incorporate body parts, blood and minerals (lead from cannon balls and iron from bullets). Huddleston is concerned with what he terms 'spiritual traces', by which he means ways in which 'tensions and sufferings of the soldiers involved in the riotous circumstance of these locations 140 years ago may come to us through written descriptions, the color of the soil, or collective memory' (ibid.: 7). He suggests that,

The battlefield is a talisman, a physical focus of violent acts. The land sparks personal memory of wartime accounts. It triggers a shared, deeper memory of human conflict and suffering, and it evokes a way of perceiving that sees in a leaf falling a man falling, a fallen man seeing a leaf falling. In the amphitheater of death many visions may have been the final sight of closing eyes.

(Ibid.: 7–8)

I quote this at length because Huddleston's writing indicates something of his approach to photography. He emphasises content, metaphor and form as key facets of imagery in itself. In his publication, *Killing Ground* (2002), contemporary colour photographs made at battle sites are juxtaposed with archive materials, thereby paying attention to historical context. Archive images include studio portraits of those newly enlisted, no doubt intended as mementos for family and friends that testify to the fear of never returning. This was a war in which 30 per cent of Southern white men under age 40 and 10 per cent of all Northern men under 45 died – two out of five men were killed or wounded (also many civilians in the South) (Huddleston, 2002: 3). Along with maps and early photographs of campsites and battlefields, the portraits are juxtaposed with Huddleston's pictures detailing contemporary uses of the land. Captions state location, comment on the old photographs, and
note casualty statistics. The diarist montage tactic is effective poetically as well as for historical detail. For example, a portrait of a Virginian who died in battle at Harrisonburg, Virginia in June 1862 is juxtaposed with a close-up of the red earth of the battlefield; a disintegrating piece of material in the form of a cross is held on the surface of the ground by boulders. The symbolism is perhaps over-stated, but the effect is nonetheless poignant.

'Turner Ashby, of Fauquier City, Virginia, age 33, was photographed after being killed here', 6 June 1862, Harrisonburg, Virginia.