Beechenbrook: Forgetting, to Remember

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In the winter of 1864-65, Margaret Junkin Preston received a letter from her husband. Colonel John Preston was away, fighting on behalf of the Confederate States of America in the Civil War, and penned her the following words: "'I send you a little poem which is making a great stir here in Richmond: it is rather a pretty thing, but you could do something much better in the same line'" (Allan 199). Col. Preston's words were somewhat taken as a dare by his literary wife, who had already published a (rather poorly received) novel a decade prior. More taken to poetry and more refined in her poetic skill, Preston immediately began writing and, less than a year later, *Beechenbrook* was published. *Beechenbrook,* a work exclusively of poetry, includes a 74-page epic poem entitled "Beechenbrook; A Rhyme of the War" that chronicles the tragic story of Alice and Colonel Douglass Dunbar, a couple experiencing the Civil War first-hand. Preston's book is an object of remembrance that, paradoxically, relies upon forgetting gender roles, religion, and, most importantly, slavery. *Beechenbrook* is a relic of the Confederacy, ensuring the endurance of the fallen nation in the public psyche for years to come, but its success as a memorial depends on the omission of essential aspects of the narrative.

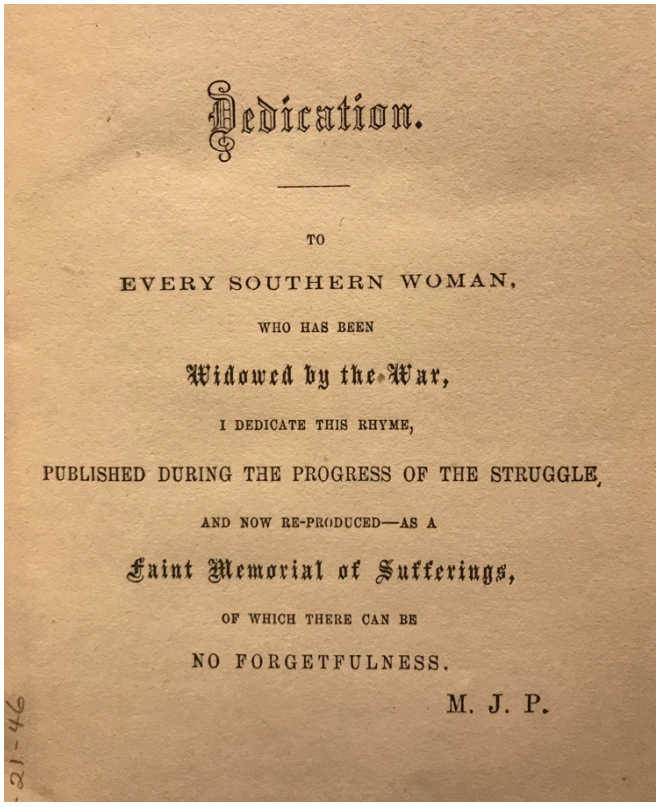
"Beechenbrook" opens with the Colonel's dramatic departure for battle from the Dunbar family home—Beechenbrook cottage—in an emotional farewell predominated by a sense of duty to defend one's nation and beliefs. The poem goes on to illustrate the continued monotony of domestic life at home while Col. Dunbar fights, although Alice and her family are constantly reminded of their war-torn reality: the Confederate army, an object of fascination and awe, marches through town, and Sophy, their young daughter, is terrified upon hearing the sounds of battle nearby. As the epic progresses, in accordance with the passage of time and developments of the war, the Dunbar family's trials escalate. When the Confederate army invades the Shenandoah Valley, their home is destroyed. Shortly thereafter, Alice receives news of Col.

Dunbar's injury in battle, and rushes to the hospital only to find that she is too late. Alice immediately wishes that she, too, were dead, but quickly abandons this mentality in order to support the southern war effort. Alice's resolve to carry on overpowers her grief for her husband, and the epic ends with an exclamation of her undying devotion to the Confederate cause.

In order to investigate the tension between remembrance and forgetting in "Beechenbrook," the epic genre must first be explored. Epics are typically long, narrative poems tracing the heroism of one character (*Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*). "Beechenbrook" satisfies this characterization—at 74 pages, the poem comprises the great majority of *Beechenbrook* as a whole, and the poem closely traces the story of the Dunbar family through the Civil War. Epics are grounded in Classical tradition—some of the most well-known epic poems are Homer's *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid*—and typically employ a meter of 11 syllables per line, known as hendecasyllable. "Beechenbrook" follows this meter with militaristic discipline—creating an obvious parallel between the format of the poem and the historical moment to which Preston responds—despite the fact that this meter is seldom used in English (*Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*). The traditional epic meter both situates Preston's work within the genre of epic poetry, but also marks it as exceptional in applying the meter to English. Epics are not confined to the Classical period, and these more contemporary works provide important points of comparison for "Beechenbrook." One such epic is that of Mary Boykin Chestnut, a white woman in the Civil War era, that Professor Julia A. Stern has studied extensively. Stern offers a useful definition of the epic as the basis for her analysis: epics are the "the representation of the project of founding a nation or culture" (Stern 13). Epics, and all of their identifying characteristics, serve as literary explorations and illustrations of a culture's

ideological tenets. In so doing, the works themselves become essential cornerstones of that society's established culture. For Preston, the culture of focus is that of the Confederacy, as "Beechenbrook" adopts the form and function of the epic genre to memorialize the fallen would-be nation by consciously excluding significant aspects of the past.

Preston sets up the dynamic of remembrance and forgetting from the very beginning of the work, through the dedication. Immediately following the title page, the dedication reads:



Dedication.

TO

EVERY SOUTHERN WOMAN,

WHO HAS BEEN

Widowed by the War,

I DEDICATE THIS RHYME,

PUBLISHED DURING THE PROGRESS OF THE STRUGGLE,

AND NOW RE-PRODUCED—AS A

Faint Memorial of Sufferings,

OF WHICH THERE CAN BE

NO FORGETFULNESS.

M. J. P.

21-46

Figure 1: Dedication

The dedication is dramatic, to say the least, and perfectly sets up the high intensity and emotion of the work that follows. In dedicating her work to the widows of the war, Preston proclaims its status as an elegy—directly, for the lives of soldiers lost, and by extension, for the entire southern antebellum lifestyle. The spatial layout of the dedication on the page looks like writing

on a gravestone—an epitaph, as Preston figuratively carves in stone how the Confederacy should be remembered. Additionally, Preston's choice to print the entire dedication in capital letters likens the dedication to a newspaper headline or advertisement. *Beechenbrook,* then, is not just an epic, and this preceding message is not just a heartfelt expression of grief—together, the work and dedication represent a direct proclamation of solidarity with an entire population and past.

Two lines of the dedication stand out for being in a different font, automatically calling attention to them. These lines, "Widowed by the War" and "Faint Memorial of Sufferings," are visually connected, and equally linked by their focus on death, indicated by the words "widowed" and "memorial." Preston hereby doubles the emphasis on the casualties of the war, leaning on dramatic sentiment and prefacing a collection of poetry that relies extensively on feeling in its recollection. It must also be noted that the fancier font is bolder than the regular—therefore, printing "Faint" in this type creates an unavoidable, but meaningful, dissonance between form and content. Just like there is nothing faint about the print of the word, there is nothing subtle about "Beechenbrook" and the message Preston communicates therein.

In her quest to memorialize the Confederate experience through her epic poem, Preston relies on the careful inclusion and exclusion of central aspects of southern ideology. One of these themes is the role of gender in society, and Preston's poetic exploration reveals her ardent support of traditional divisions of labor that rely on the virtuous, domestic woman and strong, heroic man. Such emphasis can be seen in Section II, as Alice contemplates the struggles of war her husband endures while she toils away at home. Reflecting on the war as she sews, Alice dreads the comparative smallness of her role: "Poor, petty employments they sometimes appear, / And on her bright needle there plashes a tear,--" (18). This scene is the quintessential tableau of female domesticity—the emotional wife carrying out traditional household tasks, while she

thinks about her husband—but within it, Alice begins to question the value of her household duties. The alliteration of "poor, petty" draws attention to these words as characterizations of Alice's housework, while the specification of the needle as "bright" highlights the glaring reality of Alice's tedious responsibilities. The speaker of the poem extends Alice's frustration so far as to say, "it irks her—the weakness of womanhood then,--" (18), but quickly doubles back to assure Alice and, by extension, the reader, of the importance of female domesticity: "Yet such are the tears that make heroes of men!" (18). Successful masculinity, with all its associated duties, is predicated upon the selfless domestic drudgery of the woman at home.

Preston's advocacy for domestic femininity through Alice's experience conveniently fails to acknowledge her own departure from this role in writing a highly political epic. Glimpses into Preston's struggle between her seemingly irreconcilable roles—author and wife—are visible only in her personal correspondence with Paul Hamilton Haynes, a well-known poet in the post-Civil War South. She writes, "'Congratulate yourself, my dear sir, that you are a *man*, and thus free from the thousand petty housewifely distractions that fill up the life of a wife and mother!" (Klein 68). Preston disliked the fact that her obligations as a woman drew her away from her writing, and thus limited the potential success of her craft. She used precisely the same word, "petty," to describe Alice's thoughts in the aforementioned scene, creating a connection between the emotions of her epic and those that dominated her own life. Even in the midst of such frustration, however, Preston, like Alice, always returned to her wifely duties with fervor. In a later letter to Haynes, she wrote, "But I am not going to run a tilt…against the existing order of things. I scorn to see a woman, who confesses even to very positive literary proclivities, turn with contempt from, or neglect the proper performance of a simple woman's household duties" (Moore 487). Domesticity, regardless of circumstance, thought, or question, ultimately rules the

day—a message of Preston's own life embodied and ventriloquized by the character of Alice, even though Preston herself resists the status quo by writing and publishing *Beechenbrook*.

Preston extends her message regarding traditional female roles to young women as well, through the figure of Sophy, Alice's and Col. Dunbar's daughter. At Christmastime, a letter from Col. Dunbar recalls his encounter with a young orphaned man on a mountain-path. While the letter is addressed to Alice, he breaks momentarily to address his daughter:

> Now, Sophy! –your needles, dear!—Knit him some socks,
> And send the poor fellow a pair in my box;
> Then he'll know, --and his heart with the thought will be filled,--
> There is *one* little maiden will care if he's killed (37)

The importance of domesticity is instilled young into women of the Confederacy. It is noteworthy that this message comes to Sophy from her father at the front, not her mother engaging in these traditional tasks in her own home. Even from a distance, her father impresses the importance of traditional femininity upon her, as expressed through material goods and public displays. The knitted socks, a tangible gift to the soldier, serve as a physical product of domesticity and an emblem of supportive femininity in the battle camp. The value of domesticity, for Col. Dunbar and subsequently instilled into Sophy, comes precisely from its extension beyond the walls of the home. Moreover, the motivation for Sophy's sewing is portrayed as a way to help the Confederate cause—giving this orphaned soldier a sense of belonging and care, by a woman, that will help him continue to face the trauma of war each day. The request that Sophy knit the socks also puts Colonel Dunbar in the position of matchmaker, and highlights the supremacy of romantic affection—from someone the soldier's own age—over parental affection—from an older woman, like Alice—for those in battle.

The matchmaking underpinnings of this passage closely align with the actual fascination with marriage in Confederate tradition. Historian George Rable describes how the nineteenth-

century South was plagued with "matrimonial mania" (Rable 270), which emphasized a woman's obligation to marry young and bear several children. Female destiny was inextricably linked to matrimony, serving as an emblem of the southern traditionalist values that endured amidst the anguish of the wartime years. Historically speaking, this fascination led to hundreds of unhappy marriages that would later become the subjects of literature, particularly novels written by women in the last decades of the century (Rable 271). Nowhere in "Beechenbrook," however, does Preston acknowledge this potentiality. Instead, the discussion of Sophy knitting socks for the orphaned soldier is rife with feelings of duty, and the hope and excitement that accompanies fulfilling such responsibility. Preston's epic thus asserts traditional female roles both by emphasizing their function in present day and laying the groundwork for their endurance into the next generation—all the while overlooking her own break from the traditional female mold as a political poet.

Preston uses the theme of religion as another primary focus for her memorialization of Confederate society. One of the first instances of religion in the poem occurs in Section I, when Alice and her family are saying goodbye to Colonel Dunbar as he leaves for battle. Reacting to Alice's sobs, Archie, the three-year-old son of the family, says:

> Mamma is *so* sorry! – Mamma is *so* sad!
> But Archie can make her look up and be glad:
> I've been praying to God, as you told me to do,
> That Papa may come back when the battle is thro': –
> He says, when we pray, that our prayers shall be heard;
> And Mamma, don't you *always* know, God keeps his word? (11)

In the manuscript of *Beechenbrook*, the passage appears like this (see following page):

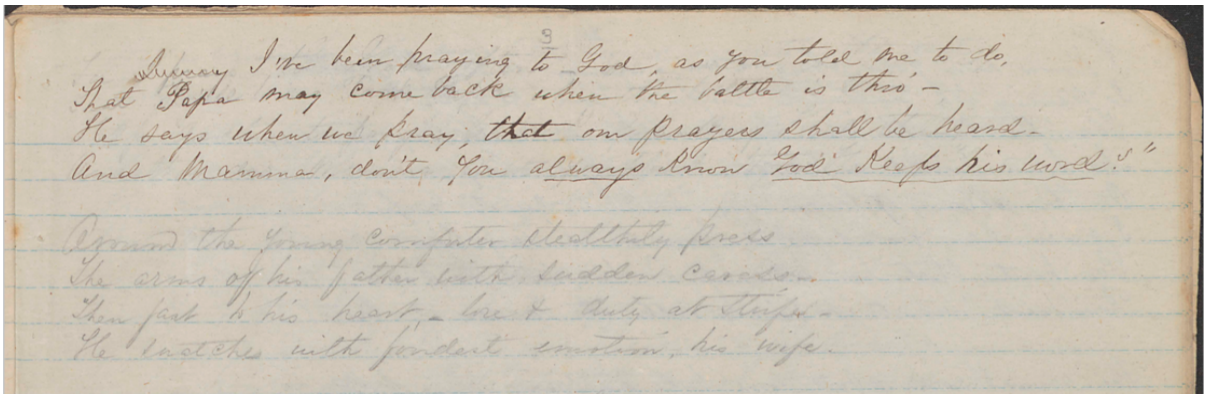


Figure 2: Manuscript Excerpt
(UNC Wilson Special Collections Library)

The physicality of these lines in the manuscript contribute to Preston's trope of forgetting in that they were a later addition to the work, replacing a stanza that was already there. The original stanza was well erased—traces of its existence are barely visible—but the darker penmanship of this passage indicates it was added after the rest of the surrounding stanzas. This leads the reader to question the content of the original stanza—but the fact is, regardless of what used to be there, Preston viewed Archie's comments as more important. Archie, in his youthful, innocent determination to cheer up his mother, embodies the entrenchment of religious values in Confederate society. The placement of "always" in the final line is particularly noteworthy, because it modifies Alice's state of knowledge, not God's fulfillment of promises. In other words, Archie does not say, "Mamma, don't you know, God *always* keeps his word," but instead "Mamma, don't you *always* know, God keeps his word." This placement choice significantly changes the meaning of the line, putting the onus on Alice and her relationship with God, rather than on God himself. Moreover, the manuscript underlines both "always" and "God keeps his word," but the latter emphasis was lost in the published version. In eliminating this typographical stress, greater attention is drawn to the italicization of "always" and its associated implications. Here, again, forgetfulness governs the legacy and remembrance of Confederate

society, particularly in its reliance on intense religiosity among even the youngest members of society.

Preston further develops the theme of religion through her exploration of religious figures, including the chaplain. The chaplain is introduced in Section VII of the poem, in the midst of the camp where Col. Dunbar sits with his fellow soldiers. Preston writes, "'Tis the twilight of the Sabbath—and sweet through the air, / Swells the blast of the bugle, that summons to prayer:" (53). The chaplain's entrance is literally announced with a trumpet, as though he were an archangel. Preston further emphasizes the chaplain's importance through his speech, which breaks from the requisite hendecasyllable meter. Instead, the chaplain speaks in strict four-line stanzas, each line containing seven syllables, and the stanzas conform to *abab* rhyme scheme instead of the *aabb* rhyme scheme of the rest of the poem. This metrical break makes the chaplain's lines physically distinct from the rest of the epic, as Preston uses every tool at her disposal to call attention to this figure's importance. The chaplain's prayers are what one would expect in a time of war—for peace, safety, guidance, and protection—but Preston communicates that the impact of his prayer far exceeds that of the words themselves. Preston describes the moments after he stops speaking:

> The Bible is opened and stillness profound
> Broods over the listeners scattered around;
> And warning, and comfort, and blessing, and balm
> Distil from the beautiful words of the Psalm. (54-55)

The chaplain's words and the messages of the Bible bring feelings of solace not granted by any other person or source in the rest of epic. The repetition of phrasing in the third line likens prayer to a soothing lullaby, while the words "distil" and "beautiful" communicate the purity of prayer—precisely the opposite of the horrors of battle. Moreover, it is the mere act of opening the Bible, and of being exposed to the chaplain's words, that has such an effect. The soldiers are

passive recipients of religion, as the words wash over them—recalling the image of baptism, in which holy water washes over a baby and cleanses him or her from sin. In this way, Preston communicates the purifying force of religion, but also the power it holds over the Confederate army in providing comfort after battle and, as a result, maintaining their spirits moving forward.

The role of religion that Preston emphasizes draws upon the actual role of religion in driving the Confederate cause. Historian Dillon Carroll writes that "religion proved uniquely able…to stabilize the psyche after battlefield trauma…The faith in…God to bring order out of chaos and make the irrational rational, became self-fulfilling prophecy" (Carroll 253). In the face of post-battle horror, soldiers turned to God for comfort, but also for guidance to continue enduring the trauma in which they found themselves. This inevitably led to further devastation after another battle, and so the cycle continued. Religion provided the Confederacy both the strength to fight and the comfort to heal after trauma—to forget the horrors of war and continue on—themes Preston emphasizes in her portrait of the fallen nation.

While Preston clearly portrays the power of religion in this instance, its meaning is easily overshadowed in the face of the meta implications of the scene she creates. This whole passage, including the chaplain and the Bible, can be viewed as a representation for Preston and *Beechenbrook* itself. *Beechenbrook* lies open for the reader just as the Bible lies open amongst the soldiers, elevating Preston's work to a spiritual level. Just as with the Bible, the mere fact that *Beechenbrook* is open, presenting the opportunity for enlightenment, brings peace and solitude over the intended audience—or so she hopes. The reader parallels the soldiers in the epic—passive, enraptured recipients of Preston's holy word, now taking up the mantle of defending the memory of the Confederacy in a tumultuous present. Finally, as voice of this divine message, Preston herself becomes the chaplain. By extensively indicating the chaplain's

significance—through the meter, form, and content of the poem—Preston effectively emphasizes her own importance as the author of this transcendent work. The power and relevance of religion is quickly forgotten upon recognition of the greater, meta implications of this passage.

Equally, if not more important, than what Preston includes in her depiction of the Confederacy is that which she entirely excludes: slavery. To the modern reader, the last line of the dedication, "No forgetfulness," appears nothing short of ironic; Preston's work is predicated upon forgetting—or, at least, explicitly failing to address—an enormous portion of the Civil War narrative. The word "slave" appears only once in the entire poem, in Section II. Preston describes Alice watching the Confederate army march through town in their journey to battle:

> One thought is absorbing, with giant control, –
> With deadliest earnest, the national soul: –
> 'The right of self-government, crown of our pride,
> Right, bought with the sacredest blood, –is denied!
> Shall we tamely resign what our enemy craves?
> No! martyrs we *may* be! –we *cannot* be slaves!' (19)

These lines, impassioned and emotional, communicate the motivation of the Confederate cause as resistance to "enslavement" of white Southerners by the North. This "enslavement," historically speaking, refers to the difference of opinion between the regions about the best means of governing—the North advocating a strong federal government and limited states' rights, and the Confederacy supporting the opposite. By relegating her discussion of slavery to this realm, and failing to acknowledge or address the actual institution of slavery, Preston portrays the enslavers themselves as the victims. Moreover, Preston communicates the gravity of the situation by invoking—what else—the Bible. The phrases "crown of our pride," "sacredest blood," and "martyr" all work to create the image of Jesus. Jesus, the ultimate martyr, donned a crown of thorns and bled from a cut on his stomach during his crucifixion. By employing these firmly established, powerful religious images, the speaker lauds Southerners for

their holy sacrifice in going to war, while simultaneously establishing the necessity of this sacrifice to resist "enslavement" by the North.

Preston's failure to address slavery in her work highlights the way in which this text not only expresses the culture of the past—the Confederacy—but lays the foundation for the future—the cult of the Lost Cause. In the aftermath of the Civil War, the Lost Cause movement portrayed the Confederate effort as heroic, despite its apocalyptic defeat. The central tenet of the ideology was that "the South had fought from a 'sense of rights under the Constitution,'" and that "the founding fathers had bequeathed the inevitable war to the country because they had left as an unfinished question the proper relation of the states to the federal government" (Blight 37). The Civil War, from this perspective, was a crusade of honorable men fighting for their political rights, and their defeat merely a product of inadequate industrial resources (Blight 37). Such mentality can clearly be seen in Preston's lines above, as she directly mentions the "right of self-government" that motivated the Confederate war effort. Preston also uses paratextual details throughout the work to emphasize the naturalness and righteousness of southern Civil War ideology. For example, she adorns the beginning of each section of the epic with a banner of greenery and flowers, and two of these banners, for Sections I and X, include centerpieces of a military helmet (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Banner for Sections I and X

By unifying nature and the military in this detailed illustration, Preston visually indicates Confederate military motivation as grounded in fundamental, inherent principles. Additionally, the fact that these identical banners adorn the first and last sections of the epic unifies it into a single, coherent piece, in which Preston consistently advances the ideology of the Confederacy as motivated by natural, self-evident rights.

While one of the central elements of the Lost Cause ideology was the justification of the Civil War on Constitutional grounds, the holistic efficacy of the movement depended upon the complete erasure of slavery from the discussion. Like Preston's poem, other early works of the Lost Cause movement, such as newspaper editorials, entirely eliminated slavery from their portrayal of the war and Confederate defeat (Blight 37). The Lost Cause carefully evaded any mention of slavery or black emancipation in the writings, organizations, and rituals they would later develop over decades, instead crafting public memory of the Civil War based on "a cult of the fallen soldier, a heritage community awaiting its exodus, and a people forming a collective identity as victims and survivors" (Blight 38). These principles allowed for the romanticization of the Confederate cause, as white Southerners used the Lost Cause ultimately to "forget the unseemly parts…and eventually rewrite the history of the War" (Rable 236). The complete elimination of slavery from discussion, in both Preston's epic and the Lost Cause ideology overall, precisely allows for the success of each.

While individual themes within the text highlight the profound exclusions Preston makes from her work, the book as a whole represents the most personal forgetting for the author herself: that of her identity as a Northerner. Preston was born in Pennsylvania, and lived there until relocating with her family to Lexington, Virginia at age 28 (Coulling 57). Upon the declaration of Southern secession, her father and sister, with whom she was very close, returned to

Pennsylvania, and regulations prevented Preston from contacting them for the duration of the war (Klein 46). Lonely and isolated, Preston found herself torn between her two identities: a Northerner by birth and blood, a Southerner by residence and marriage (Klein 46). She confided to her diary: "When I am compelled to hear scorn and loathing predicated to anything *Northern* (as must continually be the case), my heart boils up, and sobs to itself" (Allan 143). Preston's voice as heard in her diary—tormented by her complex past and incapable of reconciling her own duality—never appears in "Beechenbrook," despite her writing and publishing the work merely four years later. Instead, every aspect of the epic, from speakers to themes to paratextual details, points to undying support of the Confederate cause. Moreover, the physicality of the work itself allows for the careful guarding of Preston's pro-Confederate message for centuries to come. While not the originally published version—the dedication specifies it as "re-produced," and the publication date indicates its printing two years after the first copy—this book is built to last. The dark green hard covers are embossed in gold with the title on the front and spine. The edges of the pages are gilded, highlighting the elevation and importance of the book. In this way, the book itself serves as a physical manifestation of Preston's devotion to the South, allowing for the protection and safeguarding of her words from 1867 to the present day. It also thus represents Preston's complete abandonment of the northern identity that tormented her at the start of the war—on this most macro scale, the forgetting, necessary to achieve remembrance, becomes deeply personal.

Margaret Junkin Preston's *Beechenbrook* is a written memorial to the Confederate States of America. Preston uses the form and content of her epic poem to remember the fallen would-be nation, invoking central tenets of its ideology while necessarily excluding enormous portions of the narrative. Preston also forgets, or at least apparently abandons, huge parts of her own

identity in crafting this work, moving the tension of remembrance and forgetting beyond the political and into the personal realm. In a book that declares itself an object of memorialization from the very outset, the presence and power of this tension presents a fundamental reality about memorials on the whole: they necessarily rely on both included and excluded aspects of the past, and depend on the relationship between them. The value of the memory does not lie in judging these details or discounting a narrative for what it focuses on or omits. Instead, the value lies in recognizing and appreciating both what is remembered and forgotten, and how these elements work together to create a powerful, lasting memorial that allows readers to cling to a beloved history.

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