



Readers' Room

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Erin L. Thompson, *Smashing Statues: The Rise and Fall of America's Public Monuments* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2022, \$25.95). Pp. 288. ISBN 978 0 3938 6767 1.

In her recent book *Smashing Statues: The Rise and Fall of America's Public Monuments*, art historian Erin L. Thompson crafts a compelling analysis of the impassioned debates surrounding the historical constructions and present-day implications of American monuments. The polarizing “should they stay or should they go” contestations most loudly direct the seemingly binary battle between protections and protestations of some of the country's most controversial totems. Thompson's thoughtful prose and deeply researched case studies, however, provide a more complex and nuanced mosaic that addresses the white-supremacist motivations and falsely manufactured narratives behind their constructions, as well as the various avenues and obstacles navigated by those with and without political power who try to keep them up or bring them down.

While debates and demonstrations surrounding controversial American monuments unquestionably intensified in the aftermaths of such recent tragedies as the 2015 mass shooting at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, and the 2020 police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Thompson's *Smashing Statues* uncovers a lineage of active resistance against contested monuments that can be traced back to the country's creation and its earliest national myth-making artistic endeavors. “The history of American public monuments begins,” she notes early in the book, “not in creation, but in destruction” (4). To illustrate this concept, Thompson begins Part I, “Rising,” with stories of the 1776 beheading of a statue of King George III by American soldiers in New York. This event took place just days after the Declaration of Independence was ratified. Thompson also focusses on two mid-nineteenth-century, federally funded works of Horatio Greenough – the first American sculptor to challenge the “consistent American tradition of importing either statues or sculptors from Europe” – commissioned for Washington, DC's Capitol building (21). These statues elicited unfavourable responses, leading Congress to shutter them behind the walls of a museum and a government warehouse. Thompson uses the former to discuss Martin Warnke's concept of iconoclasm from above (“Those who come into power erase the art of those who have fallen from power”) and she uses the latter to showcase the ease with which “powerful protestors will be able to take advantage of the legal means offered by a system that they also control” (11, 24).

“Rising” also contains two chapters devoted to Confederate monuments – arguably the most notorious example of controversial American public monuments (at least by volume) – as she seeks to understand why, despite a flurry of heightened protests over

the last decade, hundreds of them still stand in prominent places of power like courthouse lawns, city centers, and town squares across the country. Instead of just retelling the well-worn Lost Cause originations of these monuments as venerating the anti-American secessionist Confederacy and its notorious icons and leaders, Thompson masterfully complicates the discussion by outlining how the proliferation of monuments depicting anonymous, low-ranking soldiers standing at “parade rest” was often chosen for “demonstrating obedience” during a period when multiple interracial southern workers’-rights organizations were agitating and striking for safer conditions, shorter hours, and higher wages (46, 49).

This section of the book also contains Thompson’s most effective mix of richly threaded scholarship and whip-smart tone as she colorfully details the decades of white-supremacist-fueled determination that resulted in the completion of the largest Confederate monument in the country: the carving of Jefferson Davis, Stonewall Jackson, and Robert E. Lee on the face of Stone Mountain outside Atlanta, Georgia. Thompson employs Stone Mountain’s chaotic path to creation – sparked by the resurrection of the Ku Klux Klan on its mountaintop in 1915, funded by multiple white-supremacist organizations, driven to completion in response to the 1954 Supreme Court ruling on school integration, and not officially dedicated until the 1970s – to elucidate “the importance of looking deeper than just the people portrayed on a monument. We also need to know what the people who carved them there wanted – and what sort of behavior the monument has encouraged” (66). While proponents of Stone Mountain often espouse the mantra of “heritage, not hate” that hides the true motivations of the monument’s messaging, Thompson points to the facts that the KKK used the land around Stone Mountain’s base for annual gatherings well into the 1990s and that they have been denied permits to assemble there as recently as the late 2010s. “Pretending that Stone Mountain is mainly the product of the romantic dreams of a mourning widow,” she writes, “does nothing but provide cover for those who want to continue to use it as what it was designed, built, and maintained to be: a source of strength and encouragement for white supremacists” (91).

The second half of *Smashing Statues*, “Falling,” finds Thompson analyzing the potential paths for monument removals (and the lack thereof) both by highlighting the myriad of obstacles facing those looking to discuss removals through intentionally complicated (and sometimes nonexistent) legal means and also by contextualizing the stories behind some removals by individuals that so often get mischaracterized as mere acts of vigilante vandalism. Thompson elevates this section by combining her impeccable research and vivid storytelling with multiple interviews with individuals who have successfully and unsuccessfully fought for specific monument removals both within and without circles of social influence and political power.

By speaking directly with such individuals as Indigenous activist Mike Forcia (who toppled a statue of Christopher Columbus at the Minnesota state capitol building after decades of formal petitions had gone ignored); current Birmingham, Alabama mayor Randall Woodfin (whose decision to order the removal of a controversial Confederate monument in his city defied state law, drew the ire of the state’s attorney general, prompted a prolonged legal battle, and incurred hefty fines); and John Guess Jr., who has used his role as CEO of the Houston Museum of African American Culture to rehome and reframe the controversial *Spirit of the Confederacy* monument that was removed by Houston’s mayor in 2020, Thompson impressively crafts the argument that while the “nightly news might make you think that fights about

American monuments are carried out by crowds of protesters clashing with counter-protestors ... [t]he real battle for control over American monuments is fought politely and out of the public view in legislative hearings" (138). Thompson also points out that, even despite the heightened cultural conversations surrounding the desire for recontextualization or removal of controversial American monuments in recent years, this legal element of the monument debate has been substantially strengthening the hardening of protections and moving farther away from creating more formal avenues for community petitions for removal.

Thompson concludes *Smashing Statues* with the charge that, although most American monuments were "put up by people who wanted to freeze American society into place, with themselves at the top," it is now time to "ask more of our monuments" (184–85). She thankfully steers clear of offering any "one-size-fits-all" methods for accomplishing this task, while also reminding readers that two foundational concepts should be anchored within any discussion regarding the fate of monuments. First, resolutions should be decided not by powerful individuals but by the communities within which these monuments are standing. Second, it is important to understand that what are most often framed as acts of anti-monument vandalism are the only remaining options amidst "the absence of any peaceful, legal route to remove a monument that an entire community despises" (xx). Thompson's book does an impressive job of both widening the lens on the often polarizing American monument debate and also threading many nuanced layers of research in an attempt to disrupt the clichéd talking points that so often stagnate the discussion into reductionist binaries.

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Brooke Blower, *Americans in a World at War: Intimate Histories from the Crash of Pan Am's Yankee Clipper* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023, £26.99/\$34.95). Pp. 529. ISBN 978 0 1993 2200 8.

Brooke Blower's *Americans in a World at War* is a marvel of archival recovery. Focussed on the period between 1914 and 1943, the author draws on digital databases, newspaper reporting and family papers to reconstruct the lives of six very different American citizens united by two common features: first, all led remarkably international lives at a time of unprecedented global tension, and second, all were passengers on the final flight of the *Yankee Clipper*, an ill-fated Pan-American aircraft that crashed off the coast of Lisbon in February 1943.

The passengers on the *Yankee Clipper* were both products of and participants in global exchange. Blower consistently refers to her six core "characters" by their first names. They consist of Frank, a salesman; Tamara, an actress and musician; Ben, a journalist; George, a lawyer; Manuel, a shipping agent; and Harry, an oil man. Two of the six were born outside the United States, a further three are the children or grandchildren of immigrants. While none fired a gun in either of the world wars, all were remade in the crucible of conflict. The book centres the recurring difficulties Americans faced in balancing their own affinities and goals with "national interests" that shifted according to circumstances far beyond their control. The flight of Frank, an export agent turned radio correspondent from Java to Australia in the wake of the