

“The Curation of American Patriotism:
The American Legion and the “Story of Our American People.”

by George Lewis

In the aftermath of World War I, the American Legion steadily emerged as the most organized, powerful and political veterans’ body in the United States. Having been victorious in the War, the Legion soon turned much of its energy to a second battle: ensuring that Legionnaires’ collective memory of the war was commemorated appropriately. In the organisation’s first decade, therefore, considerable resource was spent in a bid to create and then protect a Legion-sanctioned narrative which included the just cause for which the United States had fought, the heroism, service and sacrifice of those who had fought for that cause, and, most contentiously, the character and history of the nation for whom they had fought.

In order to propagate this imagined narrative effectively, the Legion embarked on a multi-layered plan to disseminate it through the nation’s schools. Alongside its broader educational “Americanization” initiatives, the Legion developed and published a purpose-written, two-volume history. Designed for use in the nation’s elementary schools, *The Story of Our American People* ran to over 1,000 pages when it was published by Ginn & Co. in 1926. Plugging in to an educational vogue of eschewing critical histories in favour of less complex narratives, the Legion worked to ensure that its collective view of the recent American past became the base-level history of the US education system. Here was a United States of exalted heroes and suppressed sectional squabbles, of a civilization rooted in the Anglo-Saxon and diminished by changes in immigration.

This paper will use that history and manuscript sources from the American Legion’s own private archives to examine the version of the American past that the Legion sought to establish, the rationale for its creation and development, and the methods by which it then sought to ensure its adoption as a commonplace narrative. In so doing, it offers an insight into the ways in which veterans sought to remember not only the wars in which they fought, but also the causes for which they entered conflict.

Brief bio:

George Lewis is Professor of American History and Head of the School of History, Politics and International Relations at the University of Leicester, UK. His work focuses on race relations, civil rights, white supremacy, and American radicalism, anti-radicalism and anti-communism. As well as publications on un-Americanism and on the ideology of segregationism, he has also published on contested memories in the United States, ranging from battles between segregationists and proponents of civil rights to shifting meanings of radicalism, anti-radicalism and the aesthetics of Americanism.