

THE KENT STATE SHOOTINGS, THE LONG 1960s, AND THE CONTEST OVER MEMORY

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Thomas M. Grace. *Kent State: Death and Dissent in the Long Sixties*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016. 416 pp. Illustrations, appendix, notes, and index. \$29.95.

Craig S. Simpson and Gregory S. Wilson. *Above the Shots: An Oral History of the Kent State Shootings*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2016. 272 pp. Narrator list, map, illustrations, notes, and index. \$28.95.

Howard Means. *67 Shots: Kent State and the End of American Innocence*. Boston: Da Capo Press, 2016. 288 pp. Map, illustrations, notes, selected bibliography, and index. \$25.99.

On May 4, 1970, National Guard troops opened fire on the campus of Kent State University, discharging 67 shots in a 13-second barrage that killed four young people and injured nine others. Reactions in the aftermath reflected the deep polarization—both local and national—that had made the shootings possible. Students were stunned to discover that troops would open fire on unarmed young people on their own campus, and a few dreamed of vengeance. Most guardsmen, though, defended their actions, and opinion in the town of Kent strongly supported the Guard. The local newspaper received piles of letters critiquing the students and endorsing the actions of the soldiers. When Dean Kahler, paralyzed by a gunshot wound, opened the first card he received in the hospital, it began “Dear Communist Hippie Radical” and continued, “I hope by the time you get this you are dead. We don’t need people like you” (Simpson and Wilson, p. 142). The passage of decades has cooled the heated rhetoric of 1970, but fundamental questions about the shootings at Kent State remain both important and contested. These three books seek to engage those issues and contribute to our understanding of this event.

Challenging several common myths about the shootings, *Kent State: Death and Dissent in the Long Sixties* by Thomas M. Grace is the deeply researched, comprehensive, and critically insightful book that those who study and teach the history of the long 1960s have been waiting for. The child of Depression-

era parents and raised with a faith equal parts Catholicism and Democratic politics, Grace matriculated at Kent State in 1968. A campus activist who nevertheless attended both a history exam and a political science class prior to the noon protest on May 4, Grace was one of the students injured that day. Now a professional historian, Grace notes that "doing a history on an experience in which the author figures should give one some pause, as indeed it did for me" (p. 10). But he goes on to remind readers "there is no bias-free history. Good history, however, is fair-minded and faithful to the factual record" (p. 11). This is precisely the kind of history that Grace has produced. Written with honesty, care, and a keen critical eye, this book offers extraordinarily significant historical correctives and valuable new understandings.

Since 1970, popular narratives have expressed surprise that the shootings could have happened "at a place like Kent State," suggesting that this heartland campus was isolated from the political and cultural dynamics of the 1960s. Focusing his work on the broader history of the campus, state, region, and nation in the years 1958 through 1973, Grace challenges this assumption and situates the shootings in the history of political activism and dissent on the Kent State University campus amid a growing polarization between the campus and its community.

Kent State University in 1970, Grace tells us, was a campus dramatically different than it had been even three decades earlier. Like many U.S. institutions of higher learning, it had grown exponentially following World War Two due to veteran enrollments and the Cold War era's emphasis on higher education. With students drawn especially from the industrial cities of the region, political and cultural divides separated many of the students from the rural and conservative city and county in which they went to school. A racial divide also affected the lives of African American students, and Grace details the experiences of these students, making clear both the particular burdens they carried and the distinctive activist paths they traveled.

Despite a traditional campus culture and the Cold War political context, an activist subculture surfaced on campus in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Reflecting a mixture of working-class unionism, left-wing radicalism, and the struggle for African American rights, campus organizers benefited variously from family legacies of activism, connections to the struggles in nearby Cleveland, and the mobilizing efforts of national organizations.

As the war heated up in 1965, Kent students began active involvement in local and national opposition movements and formed the Kent Committee to End the Vietnam War (KCEVW). While a campus poll in the spring of 1967 found pro-war students still outnumbering opponents of the war by a nearly four-to-one margin, support would soon erode rapidly, both nationally and on the Kent campus, as the war expanded its scale and its reach into students' lives. In the spring of 1968 the emergence of Black United Students (BUS) and

the formation of Kent Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) continued to expand campus activism, a growth reinforced by the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy, renewed racial conflict in nearby cities, and the violence at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago.

Despite evidence of a "sea change" (p. 122) in campus culture by the fall of 1968 and the success of a BUS walkout and departure from campus, the administration and trustees continued their efforts to contain student protests, even as SDS imploded and conflicts over tactics and ideology divided campus activists. In the spring of 1969 conservatives regained control of both the student government and the campus paper, and that fall elections placed a law-and-order politician in the mayor's office. As Grace explains: "When the next surge of protest came in Kent, it would encounter a solid wall of opposition at every level of government" (p. 167). Even so, Kent State had emerged by the 1969–70 school year as a regional locus of activism: "The war's ongoing death toll on working-class youth, the threat of the draft, the appeal of broad peace coalitions, and the juncture of radical and counterculture politics combined to produce what organizers had sought since 1965—a critical mass for Kent's antiwar movement" (p. 177).

On the night of April 30, 1970, campus activists were stunned when President Nixon announced the invasion of Cambodia. The next day a small group of students called a protest at which they buried the U.S. Constitution on the Central Commons while 300 people watched. The BUS pulled together another rally, and others looked to a more radical protest in Kent's downtown that night.

The events of the remainder of this weekend are well known, but Grace gives us a particularly powerful and nuanced discussion of them. This success is evident, for instance, as he demonstrates how errors on the part of law enforcement and political leadership escalated the conflict with Kent students on Friday night. When student protestors lit fires in the middle of the street, law enforcement's haphazard tactics made matters worse, as bar closures pushed those who had been drinking, not protesting, into the streets and tear gas emptied nearby fraternity houses. Of the fourteen people arrested, only one was actually an activist. The streets were full of people because the new mayor had moved to close the bars based on a false rumor that the radical Weathermen group was plotting to take over the city. In response to this rumor, he imposed a curfew and asked the governor to be prepared to send the National Guard.

Grace details the escalating events of the weekend and adds additional insights here as well. He notes, for instance, that black students expected to be targeted by law enforcement and avoided the protests, while some other protesters left town, recognizing the potential danger as the mayor ratcheted up responses. Student crowds nevertheless grew over the weekend, as the occupation of the campus produced a broadening mood of dissent.

Grace's account of the events of May 4 itself is riveting and makes clear the failures of leadership that made the shootings possible. When the noon hour arrived, perhaps 300 active protestors arrived for the demonstration that had been called on Friday, and they were joined by thousands of onlookers and others simply walking through campus. Remarkably, the university president and his top aides were off campus for a lunchtime meeting about the situation, their absence confirming the military's belief that they were in command. Grace brings to those minutes before, during, and after the shooting a powerful sense of immediacy, and ultimately horror, in part through the inclusion of his own experiences. He succeeds admirably, too, in neatly balancing this narrative with his continued critical engagement with the sources and his precise argumentation.

As a result, Grace again corrects significant errors in the traditional narrative, dismissing, for instance, the argument that the troops were in any danger from protestors, who had largely retreated to the Prentice Hall parking lot almost 100 yards away from the soldiers when they opened fire. He challenges, too, the assumption that the shootings resulted from the National Guardsmen's youth and inexperience, demonstrating that the soldiers' mean age was over twenty-seven, and most had participated in efforts to control civil disturbances the previous summer. They had spent that week, in fact, policing striking autoworkers and thus arrived on the campus exhausted. Grace also provides evidence that there was a command given to fire, although this argument will likely remain contested.

In turn, Grace demonstrates the profound hostility local and state leaders and the National Guard felt toward the student protestors, observing, for example, that Major General Sylvester Del Corso thought the Kent protestors were "militant, Communist-inspired revolutionaries," and he became so agitated on Saturday night that he began to throw rocks back at the students as they fled before his troops (p. 207). This enmity persisted in the aftermath. "It's about time we showed the bastards who's in charge," one guardsman told a reporter, while another commented, "I felt like I'd just had an order to clean up a latrine" (p. 232). The local press only encouraged this cold response to the deaths on campus. Grace also makes clear that Governor James A. Rhodes' inflammatory words and actions throughout the events were motivated in part by an effort to shore up his failing senatorial bid.

By extending his narrative to 1973, Grace effectively refutes, as well, the claim that the Kent State shootings were the death knell of the antiwar movement—indeed of the "Sixties." Campuses across the nation erupted in response to the shootings; on the Kent State campus, activists regrouped and rallied against the indictments of the "Kent 25" and, later, the U.S. incursion into Laos. Although the antiwar movement was perhaps "less well organized" or "ideologically driven," by mid-1971 "it was wider, deeper and more diverse

than ever" (p. 253). Grace complicates as well the notion that a clear and complete divide between the labor movement and students had emerged.

In a fascinating appendix, Grace recounts the "Fates of Kent's Activist Generation," offering a final corrective to the myths surrounding the students at Kent State: the reader discovers how many of those young people went on to lives of public service and maintained their commitment to justice. After May 4, 1970, students at Kent had a new battle to fight—not only against public perceptions of them at the time and of Sixties activists who "sold out" to become wealth-seeking "Yuppies"—but over the memory of the events themselves, a subject that Grace covers in a superb concluding epilogue.

Craig S. Simpson and Gregory S. Wilson take up the issue of memory even more comprehensively in their similarly excellent book, *Above the Shots: An Oral History of the Kent State Shootings*. The authors are eloquent in explaining their approach to oral history and how these sources operate as constructed narratives of the self. With this intentional approach to the oral histories, the authors put them to extraordinarily effective use, illustrating the "complexity involved in the 'sensemaking'" revealed in so much of the testimony (p. 132). They demonstrate, for instance, how some narrators might hold seemingly contradictory or incompatible viewpoints at the same time, and how multiple witnesses, even those with shared viewpoints, might have vastly divergent memories or understandings of the same moment. Especially important is their careful distinction between what is actually true and what is psychologically true, allowing for the sincerity of speakers' words while also reading testimony against the grain. They make clear, in addition, that some narrators intentionally misrepresented and even lied about events, as in the case of Captain Ron Snyder, who, in the immediate aftermath, claimed to have found a gun on the slain Jeff Miller. The authors emphasize how many issues continue to be debated to this day, and they are not afraid to allow some questions to remain unresolved, reminding readers of the value of engaging with these differences as conflicts in the making of meaning.

Most importantly, they use the words of individuals to help readers understand the experiences of the broadest range of people. Here, as in Grace's book, the words of individuals are used with care, context, and a critical reading. The testimonies reveal the range of emotions evident among the students, faculty, administrators, guardsmen, city leaders, and townspeople in the years leading up to the shooting, during the events of May 1970, and in the aftermath. The authors' commitment to allowing narrators' voices to emerge fully is evidenced by their use of sometimes-lengthy quotations, a practice that serves these authors' purposes beautifully, humanizing the participants and allowing readers a glimpse into the impact of events on their lives. Deeply moving, for instance, is the testimony of Dean Kahler as he recounts his memory of the

flowers in bloom that he saw from the ambulance, or of James Mueller, who describes the hour-long conversation with an undercover security officer who intervened when he attempted to make a citizen's arrest of Governor Rhodes the day after the shootings.

In the second introduction, Gregory S. Wilson situates *Above the Shots* in contemporary memory studies, signaling the other key contribution of this book. Oral histories reflect both the individual and collective nature of memory, and the authors are clearly interested in the process of memory construction—"in how these individual memories become part of a larger set of collective memories about the events in 1970 and how these in turn become part of remembrance of the sixties and illustrate ongoing social, cultural, and political tensions in the United States" (p. 23). As the authors demonstrate, oral histories play a functional role for their narrators, a point illustrated again and again over the course of the book. For instance, the authors are particularly effective in explaining how the narratives of Kent, as a quietly conformist city prior to May 1970, helped people to explain their shock when the shootings happened and how such explanations facilitated placing blame on the students for the calamity. This problematic interpretation, in turn, made it easy to indict the activism of the late 1960s and 1970s and to invoke the notion of the "bad" 1960s cutting short the promise of the earlier "good" 1960s.

The final part of the book explores the process of memorialization, investigating how struggles over the physical site of the shootings became an ongoing battlefield in those contests. Borrowing from the geographer Kenneth E. Foote's work, *Shadowed Ground: America's Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy* (rev. ed. 2003), the authors explore how the memorial practices of those committed to remembering the violence at Kent State have attempted to sanctify and designate the space. In the process, they struggled against others—in particular the leadership of the university, who sought instead to repress or even erase the memory of the shootings. Those seeking to honor the victims and to understand their deaths as the result of an unjust assault by the state lost the initial rounds of their fight as the university called an end to official university commemorations after five years, built a new gym in 1977 on the practice field where National Guardsmen had regrouped shortly before the shootings, and fumbled the effort to build a permanent memorial on campus, for instance rejecting a commissioned sculpture by George Segal that depicted the moral struggle of Abraham and his son Isaac. Today those seeking to remember can count significant victories, however. Since the opening of the memorial in 1990, those dedicated to keeping the memory present have succeeded in protecting and marking the places where the four students died in the Prentice Hall parking lot, placing a historical marker from the Ohio Historical Society in 2007, adding the site to the National Register of Historic Places in 2010, creating an educational walking tour, and opening the

May 4 Visitors Center in October 2012. Since 1971, too, annual commemorations have continued on the campus.

As they conclude this remarkable book, the authors again turn to the voices of their narrators, offering several lengthy excerpts from the oral histories focused especially on the range of ways participants think about the meaning of what happened at Kent State. These final passages, as the authors themselves suggest, "allow us to hear the continued differences and divisions over the shootings themselves and their meaning" (p. 217), and they make the case one final time for the value of this kind of approach to the historical enterprise.

Unfortunately, the expert approaches so vivid in the preceding two books are less in evidence in *67 Shots: Kent State and the End of American Innocence* by Howard Means. The book is not without value: it provides a detailed narrative of the immediate events leading up to the shootings, as well as the aftermath both on campus and in the local community. Means targets a broad popular audience, a laudable approach, and his narrative has an accessible and often engaging style, though its tendency to dramatic effect sometimes seems contrived. In the wake of the shootings, Kent becomes "the Wild West of Gunsmoke and *Shane*, *Rawhide* and *High Noon*" (p. 132), with the National Guard cast as the "new sheriff in town" (p. 34)—imagery that does little to clarify the scene on campus.

Means takes seriously, though, the need to understand how such a tragedy could happen, and he succeeds in allowing all the participants to speak in the pages of his book. Worrisome, though, is his tendency to use sources unquestioningly. For instance, he includes, without critical comment, claims of outside agitators' responsibility for the protests and of careful planning for the events of Friday and Saturday night. This is particularly problematic as he considers the testimonies of National Guardsmen, too often letting stand without analysis claims such as the extraordinary danger they felt they faced on the campus or suggestions that they suffered not only from a constant barrage of rocks, but also the throwing of human feces or urine during confrontations with students.

As these examples suggest, Means' tendency to accept sources uncritically leads him to reinforce precisely those myths that the more careful works reviewed above overturned. For instance, though Means makes very clear that the National Guard soldiers overreacted in the shooting of unarmed students who posed no imminent danger to them, he sometimes contradicts this position as well, claiming, for instance, that, as they faced the crowd of students on May 4, many of the Guardsmen "were indeed young men, some barely more than boys, and they were scared with cause" (p. 72). Perhaps the most significant interpretive problem is Means' generalized characterization of the students as universally lacking both seriousness and meaningful political perspective.

He implies that students were motivated less by political commitment than by a juvenile tendency to act out. "Many student demonstrators," he suggests, "were differently wired. They had grown up on discord. This was the Loud Generation, not the Silent one" (pp. 125–26). He also makes repeated reference to a "hard core of protestors," but never defines this terminology or explores with appropriate depth the actual politics behind the students' actions.

Finally, to suggest that the shootings at Kent State constituted the "end of American innocence," the subtitle of this book, requires a definition of "American" that excludes millions of people who had no illusions about national innocence, and it shows Means' general inattention to either issues of race or the experiences of students of color on the KSU campus. This in turn allows him to incorrectly characterize the shootings at Jackson State College, an HBCU, on May 14, 1970, as a reaction to a student "rampage," a mistake that Grace's nuanced discussion avoids.

As the authors of *Above the Shots: An Oral History of the Kent State Shootings* observe: "Understanding the Kent State shootings remains a work in progress, and there are many more stories that have been, can be, and should be told" (p. 9). Thomas M. Grace's *Kent State* and Craig S. Simpson and Gregory S. Wilson's *Above the Shots* have each made substantial contributions to the telling of these stories, giving voice to the participants while carefully contextualizing them, analyzing them, and employing them in the hard work of understanding how the horror of May 4 could have happened. These two works reflect the best of what historical scholarship can accomplish. In our own time of deep national division and the demonizing of those who protest contemporary leadership in the United States, both texts offer significant insight into the horrific costs of hyperbolic law-and-order rhetoric, particularly when coupled with militarized law enforcement.

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