

“Living and Moving Amongst Us Again”:



John Kline and Civil War Martyrdom

Aaron D. Jerviss

OVER the last 150 years, the story of John Kline has been well-told in Brethren circles. For nearly three decades before the Civil War, Kline served the Brethren as a pastor, evangelist, and denominational leader. His opposition to both slavery and secession, along with his efforts to secure Brethren exemption from the Confederate military, however, made him suspect among his Rockingham County, Virginia, neighbors. Kline's June 1864 murder at the hands of Confederate irregulars continues to elicit speculation and finger-pointing as armchair gumshoes (Brethren and otherwise) seek to solve a puzzling “whodunit.” Considering both his standing in Brethren leadership and the tragic circumstances surrounding his death, it is not difficult to see why, in the decades after his death, John Kline became the patron saint, in the truest sense of the phrase, of Brethren Civil War memory. This article examines the Brethren martyrology of John Kline in remembrance, poetic verse, and song in the fifty years following the Civil War. On the one hand, Brethren adulation of Kline reached back through the centuries by likening Kline to the martyrs of the early Christian church and even biblical giants of faith. At the same time, however, John Kline was cast as a martyr in secular terms more easily grasped by post-Appomattox Americans: a soldier who “died at his post,” a heroic Civil War-era crusader who laid down his life for a valued personal

cause. After presenting numerous examples of Kline remembrance, this essay will conclude by placing John Kline's memory in conversation with one respected scholar's criteria for establishing authentic martyrdom. The line between martyrology and hagiography can be a thin one, and, in examining how the Brethren remembered John Kline, the adjective “hagiographic” suggests a tension with, or even a contradiction of, long-cherished Brethren ideals, such as simplicity and humility. Such terminology, however, remains appropriate only because Kline's death appeared to give the Brethren a bonafide Civil War martyr.

Throughout church history, martyrdom has been a conceptually fluid notion. After the fourth-century conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine to Christianity, for example, a highly ascetic and often solitary form of monasticism became “the new martyrdom,” a way of distinguishing valid Christianity from the fashionable Christianity of the imperial court. According to one noted medieval scholar, the Late Middle Ages became an era when “the patient endurance of suffering” replaced dying for the faith as the essential prerequisite for martyrdom. Transferring that latter understanding to nonresistants of the Civil War era, one finds no shortage of martyrs. As “patient sufferers,” the German Baptist Brethren, Mennonites, and members of the Society of Friends lost property, watched as



the state deprived them of basic liberties, and, in some cases, carried bodily scars as remnants of physical torment for the rest of their lives. A few did not live to see the end of the war. In his 1895 work *Southern Heroes*, a lengthy description of the war time sufferings of North Carolina Friends,

Kline, the advocate of nonviolence, met a quite violent end, and this murder would, to subsequent generations of Brethren, both elevate Kline beyond the status of mere denominational “hero” and prove that Christian martyrdom could and did occur on American soil.

author Fernando Cartland told the tale of the young Quaker conscript Isaiah Macon. Even though Macon refused to pick up a gun or wear a Confederate uniform, this draftee still silently endured the atrocities of battle near Winchester, Virginia. Before combat ever began, a Confederate officer uttered, “If Macon will not fight, put him in the front to stop bullets for those who will.” Positioned at the front of the fighting, Macon witnessed “the fierce shouts and fearful oaths of the combatants around him,” “the dreadful groans of wounded men and horses,” and “the gaping wounds made by shell, shot and sword.” In spite of the increasing carnage, Macon defied the prediction of his

officer by not “stopping bullets,” as described by Cartland: “(Macon) seemed to possess a charmed life. His comrades fell all around him, their places being filled by others who wondered at the strange sight,—a man with plain citizen’s dress, having neither pistol, sword, nor gun, and no military cap nor coat, calmly filling his place in battle line, but taking no part.”¹

In a tragic turn of events, Isaiah Macon died a few days after the aforementioned battle as a captive in the Point Lookout prison. Cartland described Macon as “a remarkably sensitive lad” (a man so uncomfortable with “the sight of blood...that he would rather be excused from killing the fowls needed for his dinner”) and attributed his death to “mental suffering caused by his being taken from his loved ones, and by the terrible scenes of battle.” In another passage from *Southern Friends*, Cartland wrote, “In the experience of those Friends, and of others who were conscientious in their position in favor of peace, not only did (God) support them by his presence and power, but not one of all those who steadily refused to bear arms was permitted to come to a violent death.” Fernando Cartland classified Isaiah Macon as a “good soldier” whose death advanced the cause of Christian peace, but was he a martyr? That was easier to prove in terms of suffering for the sake of righteousness rather than the more traditional notion of voluntary and violent death for a belief or cause. Without question, the Civil War bore some responsibility for killing Isaiah Macon, yet mental anguish took the life of this young man rather than bullets. With Cartland asserting that no Quaker died a violent wartime death, Friends could celebrate the gallantry of Macon and, at the same time, demonstrate a special form of divine protection for those espousing the peace viewpoint. In comparison to Isaiah Macon, however, the death of John Kline appears to be more of a literal martyrdom. Kline, the advocate of nonvio-

lence, met a quite violent end, and this murder would, to subsequent generations of Brethren, both elevate Kline beyond the status of mere denominational “hero” and prove that Christian martyrdom could and did occur on American soil.²

Although Brethren recognized John Kline as the preeminent Civil War martyr, he was not the only Brethren figure to suffer a violent wartime death. John A. Bowman (1813–1863) lived and ministered in Sullivan County, Tennessee, where his “more than ordinary” oratorical abilities made him a highly-esteemed preacher and a ubiquitous figure presiding at countless local weddings and funerals. On September 8, 1863, several men wearing the uniforms of Confederate soldiers entered Bowman’s barn, located near Blountville, seeking saddle-horses. Bowman attempted to reason with the intruders, and the 1907 Brethren history *The Olive Branch* described the ensuing confrontation: “(Bowman) implored them not to take his horse, as he very greatly stood in need of his service, and during the time he gently laid his hand upon the horse’s mane, whereupon one of the soldiers drew his gun and shot him dead.” Thus, a shot fired by “a thoughtless, reckless man in the garb of a soldier” cut short the life of “a useful servant of the Lord.” In 1912, Brethren biographers Miller and Royer used even more laudatory language when remembering Bowman’s death: “That sharp musket-shot penetrated many homes and touched many hearts, as the dastardly deed of the assassin was borne on the still morning air by the pitiful grief and moans of his loving companion and dear children. He truly died a martyr’s death.” The practice of nonresistance provided the proof of Bowman’s death for an explicitly spiritual cause: “It is well known that the position he took in favor of peace and against war made him enemies among a certain class.” In general, however, Brethren embraced John Kline as more of a martyr-hero than John Bowman. Perhaps Brethren

viewed Bowman’s death as tragic yet random, a contingent accident of time and space, based more on a refusal to part with a horse than a defense of the faith. More likely, Kline’s stature and longer length of service within the denomination caused his commemoration to overshadow the re-

As a Brethren pastor passed away, a Brethren martyr was born.

membrance of Bowman.³

On the fateful day of Wednesday, June 15, 1864, around 11:00 in the morning, the guns of an unspecified number (most likely two or three) of Confederate irregulars perched above the roadside fired several bullets into John Kline as he rode atop his beloved mare “Old Nell” after a morning of Rockingham County errand-running. In a region and time increasingly numbed by violence and loss of life, Brethren quickly ascertained that this was no ordinary wartime death. Annie Zigler Bowman (1849–1935), a Shenandoah Valley resident and acquaintance of Kline, remembered the loyalty of Nell in securing assistance for her longtime traveling companion: “...it was her continued nickering that brought help when her master was brought down by the wicked bullet and lay dead in the road. She never left his side but nickered again and again as if she would arouse him to go home. The neighbors heard this nickering up in the woods, and went to see what it meant.” For others, the final lasting impression of John Kline was the smile gracing Kline’s face as he sojourned into the eternal. Benjamin Funk, the editor of *The Life and Labors of Elder John Kline, the Martyr Missionary*, vouched, “The writer’s own eyes witnessed this. It may be that this smile was the reflection of the joy that thrilled his soul as he stepped out of his broken tenement of clay

into the presence and light of his Redeemer." As a Brethren pastor passed away, a Brethren martyr was born.⁴

Interestingly enough, the effort to turn John Kline into a martyr predated the death of Kline. Two separate letters printed in the January 1862 issue of the Brethren periodical *The Gospel Visitor* repeated rumors of Kline's demise circulating throughout the denomination. A correspondent writing from Mt. Morris, Illinois, inquired, "There has news come to us from the South that brother John Kline and another brother by the name of Arnold have been shot just for saying, 'they thought it not right for brethren to go to war.' We would like to know the certainty." At the other end of the Union, reports surfaced of a Berks County, Pennsylvania, pastor telling his congregation that "the Rebels" had hung John Kline. An individual hearing this sermon quoted the pastor as saying, "They had tried to force (Kline) into their army, which he refused to do, being conscientious in the matter; they then destroyed and confiscated all his property, and hung him to a tree." The notion of Confederate military officials conscripting a Brethren elder in his mid-sixties may have been dubious, but this did not still Brethren anxieties. Bombarded by requests for reliable information concerning Kline, the editor of *The Visitor* could only entrust Kline's current condition to the sovereign hand of God: "...the present state of things in our land and nation, and especially in the South is such that 'prayer should be made without ceasing of the church unto God for' our Brethren in affliction, for our neighbors, land, and nation, rulers and lawgivers, friends and enemies, and for all mankind." Two issues later, a reader who had recently fled Virginia reported, "I know that brother John Kline is still living and in health, although there have been some hard threats." This news temporarily eased Brethren fears, but the Shenandoah Valley remained an unstable region. In the early years of the war,

Kline's energies and spiritual convictions had already cemented his reputation as a Brethren hero, but a change in status from hero to martyr constantly hovered around Kline.⁵

After June 1864, once numerous sources confirmed the actual murder of Kline, outpourings of grief and sacral remembrance filled the pages of Brethren periodicals. In the *Christian Family Companion*, editor Henry R. Holsinger differentiated the "anti-slavery, anti-war, and anti-secession" Kline from the "proslavery, anti-christian dynasty" of the Confederacy and lamented, "Knowing the sentiments entertained by our brother in regard to the questions dividing our people and the spirit and character of his enemies, the intelligence of his martyrdom was more the signal for sorrow and pain, than of surprise." Elevating Kline to hallowed status, Holsinger then eulogized, "The name of Bro. John Kline, of Virginia passes down to future posterity as the first Christian martyr, in the history of our church in America." The editor of the *Gospel Visitor* experienced the pain of not only having to report the death of John Kline but also the manner in which this fatality occurred: "... his sudden, violent and cruel death, being shot down without a moment's warning by the hands of murderous rebels." Drawing from the biblical book of Acts for an analogy, the author continued, "...we hope and trust he was ready to depart with the prayer of the first martyr, Stephen: 'Lord, lay not this sin to their (his murderers') charge!'" In the same August 1864 issue of the *Visitor*, a brother from West Virginia provided further details about the crime: "...Elder John Kline was found dead, lying in a road not far from his house, shot with four balls. A rebel soldier said that he was shot for traveling West carrying news and helping people to get out of the S. Confederacy." Remarks such as the one furnished by the unnamed Confederate soldier prompted one reader of the *Christian Family Companion*, under the pen

name "A Friend," to rise to Kline's defense: "He had been, originally, a strong and determined Union man, but he had made up his mind to live and die in the Confederacy, and was engaged, not in the dissemination of the Union sentiments, but in striving to do all the good he could to the souls as well as to the bodies of men." While not denying Kline's engagement with pressing political matters, the letter-writer testified that the spiritual, rather than the political, ultimately motivated Kline.⁶

In another effort to validate Kline's character, the *Gospel Visitor* reprinted the obituary of Kline published in "a rebel paper," the *Rockingham Register*, on June 24, 1864. Under the heading "Murder," the Register characterized Kline as "an aged Dunker preacher of considerable prominence," "a man of great influence with and in his church," and "a man of the strictest integrity in his business transactions." These qualities notwithstanding, the newspaper also remembered Kline as "an uncompromising union man" who had been arrested in April 1862 while attempting to cross the Allegheny Mountains in order to reach Union territory. *The Register*, however, saw no reason to attribute Union sympathies as the ultimate cause of Kline's death: "(Kline) had however been honorably acquitted, and was pursuing 'the even tenor of his way,' passing frequently by permission of our authorities within the Yankee lines to preach and hold other religious services." The author predicted that "the removal of one of the pillars of the church" could have devastating effects on the Brethren community, but then admitted that not only "Dunkers," but also the Shenandoah Valley as a whole faced an uncertain precarious future: "Whilst our people differed with Mr. Kline in the erroneous views which he entertained, yet all good citizens must deplore such a lawless wreaking of vengeance upon the person of an unarmed and feeble old man. Such things show how rapidly we are drifting into scenes

which must be full of terror to us all."⁷

Being an unsolved murder mystery, the death of Kline frequently drew speculation regarding the perpetrators alongside words of reverence for the fallen. In February 1865, Henry Kurtz of Mount Joy, Pennsylvania, informed fellow Brethren readers of the

Being an unsolved murder mystery, the death of Kline frequently drew speculation regarding the perpetrators alongside words of reverence for the fallen.

Christian Family Companion that a band of Shenandoah Valley refugees who recently found their way into Pennsylvania fingered one specific individual as the murderer: "... (they) state that the name of the rebel who murdered our Bro. is JACOB ACKER, and that he boasts of having committed the wicked deed. ...They say they know Acker well, and that he threatened he would shoot him (Kline) after he came back from the Annual Meeting." Writing in the 1880s, Valley resident Orra Langhorne claimed that, within Rockingham County, the shooters' identities were no great mystery: "Although the assassins who so cruelly murdered the innocent old man were masked, there was no doubt in the community as to the names of the ruffians who had committed the brutal deed." Langhorne failed to name names but did acknowledge the divine retribution which seemingly visited three of the crime's accomplices: "It is somewhat remarkable that three of the ruffians engaged in the murder of Johnny Kline, met violent deaths, the fourth wandering restlessly to and fro upon the earth, seeking rest and finding none." The passage of time would not abate

Brethren fascination with the particulars of the murder. In 1987, Ray A. Neff released a book entitled *Valley of the Shadow*, which provided his own hypothesis concerning the true assassin of John Kline.⁸

The first of several musical odes to Kline drew on two weeks the murdered pastor had spent in a Harrisonburg, Virginia, jail in 1862. At some point in their imprisonment, members of a group of eighteen Brethren and Mennonites arrested alongside Kline for allegedly attempting to flee the Confederacy composed the verses of “The Prisoner’s Hymn” while Kline was credited with contributing the words of the chorus. The original hymn contained nine stanzas, three of which proclaimed nonresistance as crucial in establishing Civil War heroism:

We know it is God’s holy will,
Our fellow men we shall not kill;

But we should lead a Christian life,
and not spend all our days in strife...

Although the world at us may look,
as though too much we undertook,

To leave our dearest friends behind,
and seek a safer place to find:

But this we did for conscience sake,
We did not wish God’s law to break;

For those who will the Savior grieve,
Damnation surely will receive.

The chorus of “The Prisoner’s Hymn” incorporated the motif of pilgrimage, the life of spiritual strangers in a strange land: “We’ll sure go home as soon as freed/ A holy life with God to lead/ Go home, go home, and that indeed/ As soon as God the way will speed.” In the earthly realm of wartime memory, the song also reaffirmed a sense of self-conscious “outsider” status among the Brethren. Their commitment to nonresis-

tance made the Brethren and Mennonites “American strangers,” yet their peace principles marked them as distinctively Christian. Those who killed and spent “days in strife,” on the other hand, received eternal punishment.⁹

The year 1879 marked a pivotal historical moment in the development of John Kline memory. That year, Brethren held their Annual Meeting at Linville Creek, the very vicinity where Kline’s life ended fifteen years earlier. Members of the German Baptist Brethren family gathered from across the nation to participate in the customary yearly activities of conducting denominational business, corporate worship, and food and fellowship with each other. When time allowed, however, many Brethren found their way to the meetinghouse cemetery to stand in the presence of Kline’s gravestone. In his groundbreaking study of Civil War memory *Baptized in Blood*, Charles Reagan Wilson argues that both the American and Lost Cause “civil religions” highly valued the dedication ceremonies of military monuments. According to Wilson, these public gatherings contained rituals consisting of “partly commemorative rites” (“re-creating the mythical past”) and “partly mourning rites” (“converting dead heroes into revered ancestors”). One sees both of Wilson’s ritualistic functions being performed at the 1879 Annual Meeting. Benjamin Funk reported that the sight of Kline’s headstone stirred memories of a lost and revered past among the Brethren faithful: “One sister, with tears in her eyes, said: ‘He preached my mother’s funeral.’ Another said: ‘He used to visit us in Ohio; and we always loved so much to see him come.’...It would be vain to attempt to follow up all the affectionate memories that were expressed by the loving throngs of sanctified hearts that surrounded his tomb.” As Brethren grieved over their loss, they also converted Kline from an adored pastoral leader into a mythic figure. Again, Benjamin Funk observed from the vantage



point of Linville Creek, "...there was one grave from whose humble mound each visitor seemed eager to pluck a flower, a leaf, or any other little thing that might be carried back home and enshrined in a casket for a memento of one never to be forgotten. That grave was the grave of John Kline." ¹⁰

Long after the 1879 gathering ended, the trips made by Brethren admirers to Kline's graveside continued. Charles E. Nair served as a minister at the Linville Creek Church of the Brethren in the early-twentieth century and witnessed firsthand the continued Brethren preoccupation with the memory of Kline:

Since that memorable day (the day of Kline's funeral) an untold multitude from all over the Brotherhood have come and stood with unexpressed emotions and looked on his mound, and read the names and dates, and the striking inscription at the bottom of them on the modest tombstone: "When he was present he was useful/ When absent wanted much,/ He lived desired. When Killed lamented."

In a distinctly Brethren way, the John Kline gravesite served as a Civil War monument by honoring the memory of a beloved figure who displayed spiritual bravery before being struck down by the exigencies of war. In an era when Civil War military monuments increasingly dotted the landscape, the Kline tombstone commemorated the heroism of both an individual and a religious community attempting to counteract the suffering of military campaigns and battles with a message of peaceful nonresistance. While a historical product of the Civil War, however, the John Kline burial plot also represented a throwback to a much earlier form of religious veneration. The simple mound and modest tombstone contained three necessary elements of martyrology: a saint, holy relics (e.g., the flow-

ers and leaves plucked by 1879 conference attendees), and a site of pilgrimage.¹¹

The language of hagiography permeated Kline remembrance throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Instead of drawing comparisons to Catholic or Orthodox saints, however, Brethren

As Brethren grieved over their loss, they also converted Kline from an adored pastoral leader into a mythic figure.

likened Kline's life and death to those of familiar biblical heroes. Benjamin Funk associated the visage of the dying Kline with the first martyr of the church: "Stephen's living face was as the face of an angel. Brother Kline's dead face was the face of a saint—no, not the face of a saint, but the face of the earthly casket in which a saint had lived, and labored, and rejoiced; and out of which he stepped into the glories of the eternal world." Funk may have gleaned literary inspiration from the sermon delivered at Kline's funeral based on Acts 8:2 ("And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him"). *The Olive Branch*, written as "a history of the trials and experiences of the Brethren during the late war between the States," found the selected scripture verse for the memorial service to be proper and fitting: "As Stephen was the first Christian martyr, and Brother Kline the last then known, the appropriateness of the text was apparent." Charles Nair recreated Kline's final horseback ride as a mid-nineteenth century "triumphal entry": "Did (Kline), like the Master, who was going to Jerusalem last, feel that his time was drawing near? Had he in following his Master, chosen the path that

was now bringing him to a point he could not with honor avoid? He seems as a lamb going to the slaughter." In describing Kline's powerful preaching abilities, Brethren elder Daniel Hays measured Kline against a hallowed American political hero: "The personal bearing of Benjamin Franklin before

One Kline tribute, however, cast the murder in stark terms, a death comparable more to a modern soldier than a saint of antiquity.

Parliament is not more worthy of a place in history than that of Elder John Kline before an audience." Returning to more spiritual language, Hays summarized and consecrated the last moments of Kline's life: "He had ascended the mountain of life, and in the light of heaven from its summit was contemplating that 'better country where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest.'"¹²

The story and adulation of John Kline received national attention in 1886 when an article by Mrs. Orra Langhorne appeared in *The New England Magazine*. Langhorne grew up in Harrisonburg and, although not Brethren, knew Kline and his reputation well. Referring informally to the Brethren minister as "Old Johnny Kline," Langhorne meticulously recalled Kline's characteristic "blue homespun garments which are the uniform of the Dunker Brethren": a flax-linen shirt, cut-away coat, homemade shoes with leather strings, and a broad-rimmed felt hat. In an era that linked wartime heroism to masculinity, Langhorne found something more tender in Kline's physical presence: "...there was altogether about him an air of peace and serenity, seeming to lift him above the world of strife in which ordinary mortals

dwell...There was something almost feminine in his gentle presence, and fierce indeed must have been the nature, which coming in contact with him, did not feel his calm, sweet influence." When Langhorne's father warned Kline that his Unionism and noncombatant stand placed him in great jeopardy, Kline responded that "...he felt no anxiety on his own account and hoped he should never shrink for the call of duty." The next day, Langhorne and her siblings heard violent "sobbing and weeping" coming from their father downstairs. "Four masked ruffians" murdered John Kline "in cold blood," Langhorne's father informed the rest of the family. In Langhorne's recollection, "'A more cruel murder has not been committed since John the Baptist was beheaded,' said my father, as we all sat weeping over the story so common in human annals since all the days of Abel, of the innocent life of the holy one taken by the hands of evil men, who but lack the bodily form to make them beasts of prey." In the last words of the article, Langhorne established Kline as a genuine Brethren martyr: "Among the Dunker communities throughout the Union the memory of old gentle Johnny Kline will ever be revered, and the example of his patient, faithful life will be held up for emulation among his people. Today in all that region Johnny Kline is spoken softly as the household word—of whom God has taken."¹³

Like other John Kline narratives, Langhorne repeated the portrait of the "tranquil while dying" Kline. According to Langhorne, word spread throughout the community that the "country man" who first discovered Kline's body encountered "...the calm face, which wore its habitual look of heavenly peace, a faint smile resting upon the lips, the eyes gently closed, as if in sleep." Such imagery suggested certain martyrdom, a serene transition from a violent earthly end to an eternal peace. One Kline tribute, however, cast the murder in stark terms, a death comparable more to a modern soldier than



a saint of antiquity. At an unspecified date soon after Kline's death, an individual identified as simply J. Senger composed a song in Kline's honor entitled "The Lonely Grove." Senger depicted Kline as a great pastoral figure shedding "tears of love" for the surrounding region: "He often crossed the mountains high and often journeyed prairies through/ To warn the flock of dangers nigh and tell them what they ought to do." The majority, however, failed to heed Kline's evangelistic call: "Few here and there would join his band, while passing through this wilderness/ While Satan fought him hand to hand, to drive him back in and distress." In the final two verses, Senger provided his own literary interpretation of Kline's last moments:

While others died upon the bed,
with sighing friends to weep around;
He in the distant grove lay dead, on
nought but leaves and stones and
ground.

A sudden blow took life and sense,
while passing through that lonely grove,
Yet none could tell from whom nor
whence, but he who lives in heav'n
above.

References to the "calm face" and "faint smile" of Kline are nowhere to be found in "The Lonely Grove," only a hero dying in isolation. Senger's musical ode thus reflected the dislocation brought by the Civil War to traditional religious understandings of death as a communal event. In her magnificent study, *This Republic of Suffering*, scholar and former Harvard University President Drew Gilpin Faust writes that, in the Victorian mindset, the *hors mori* or "hour of death" required numerous family members and friends as bedside onlookers to ensure that the deceased would smoothly enter eternal bliss. Wartime, however, disrupted this cultural understanding of "the Good Death." Rifles fired at close range in the heat of battle mangled human bodies instantaneously

and denied the dying an opportunity to profess faith in Christ. Faust concludes, "The sudden and all but unnoticed end of the soldier slain in the disorder of battle, the unattended deaths of unidentified diseased and wounded men denied these consolations (cultural expectations of 'the good death')." While local townspeople, such as Langhorne's "country man," easily identified the body lying along the road as Kline's, a solitary violent death in a disorderly environment still invited comparisons between the death of Kline and the wartime deaths of military personnel. Whether intentional or not, Senger's song contextualized the martyrdom of John Kline within the distinctive cultural and philosophical concerns created by the Civil War.¹⁴

The drawing of analogies between Kline and the military heroes of the era continued with the often-reprinted poem, "He Died at His Post." Both Benjamin Funk (in 1900) and Brethren authors D. L. Miller and Galen B. Royer (in 1912) included the poem with their biographical recollections of Kline. Brethren attributed the poem to Kline himself as a tribute written for his late friend Joseph Miller, but a soldier's poem with the same title authored by J. W. Holman exists from the era. Holman's poem praised the patriotic sacrifices made by fighting men: "Farewell youthful soldier! we ne'er will forget/ The life thou has offered, the death thou has met!/ Of thee may our nation in history boast/ And tell the whole world, thou didst die at thy post." Kline's poem, however, used nonresistant language and subsequently became both self-authored eulogy and Civil War reconceptualization. Fighting the influence of Satan and his minions, Kline represented a powerful spiritual warrior: "For in order he led in the van of his host/ And he fell like a soldier, he died at his post." In a generation that assigned great weight to the last words of dying soldiers, Kline's final utterances only solidified his reputation as a giant of the faith: "He

wept not for himself that his warfare was done/ The battle was fought and the victory won/ But he whispered of those whom his heart clung to most/ 'Tell my brethren for me that I died at my post.'" Unlike other wartime heroes, however, this soldier demanded no days of remembrance or memorialization in marble: "He asked not a stone to be sculptured with verse/ He asked not that fame should his merits rehearse/ But he asked as a boon when he gave up the ghost/ That his brethren might know that he died at the post." As Kline expired in the temporal sense, he simultaneously arose to meet his master: "He passed o'er the stream and has reached the bright court/ For he fell like a martyr; he died at his post." Kline's great legacy, therefore, was a standard for future Brethren to follow: "An example so brilliant shall not be lost/ We will fall in the work, we will die at our post." Thus, through no conscious effort of his own, a poem written (perhaps with inspiration from a secular source) by John Kline furthered John Kline's reputation as "soldier-martyr." The account of Kline, his bloodshed, and spiritual warfare on behalf of the cause of peace stood as an alternative to the military soldiers remembered in verse, song, and public ritual throughout both the North and South.¹⁵

In 1912, amid the fiftieth anniversary of the Civil War, the Church of the Brethren periodical, *The Gospel Messenger*, conceived yet another tribute for John Kline. Part of the mysterious allure of Kline down through the years rested on the absence of any photographs taken of the Brethren pastor. Those who knew Kline well said that he, like other Brethren of the time, interpreted Exodus 20:4 ("You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth") quite literally and understood the Mosaic commandment to prohibit photographic images. *The Messenger*, however, sought to rectify this

paucity of photographic source material. Noting the "scores of people living who saw him," the editor of *The Messenger* asked readers for help in constructing a long-overdue composite picture: "We wish those who remember how he looked would make a drawing of him as his features are remembered or select a picture resembling him, and send the same to us. A score of drawings, or selected pictures, would help us to form some idea regarding the appearance of the remarkable man." The editorial encouraged those without drawing abilities to send in their written recollections of Kline and inquired specifically as to "the color of his eyes and hair," "his height, weight, and general appearance," and "his pulpit habits, his manner of presiding over a Conference, and his manner of life in general." *The Messenger* thus sought to recover "positive knowledge" of Kline's appearance, demeanor, and ministry to help alleviate the pain of a brutal wartime loss.¹⁶

This plea from the *Gospel Messenger* elicited only two subsequently published responses. Henry Niswander of Kinross, Iowa, spent time with Kline in the Harrisonburg jail cell in 1862 and remembered well Kline's "medium height," "nearly white" hair, "short, chubby beard," and plain dress consisting of "a homespun suit of blue jeans." Kline spoke with ease from behind the pulpit, Niswander remarked, but his concern for people of all ages truly made him an admired pastor: "He was especially respected by the young people, as he was of a social turn of mind, and seemed to realize that the future welfare of the church would depend on the rising generation." The great geographic distance separating Niswander and Kline made contact between the two rare during the last months of Kline's life, but the elderly Niswander still treasured Kline's memory and character: "...if Timothy loved Paul more than I loved Bro. Kline, his love was great...In the death of Bro. Kline, surely a father of Israel passed away."

Daniel Hays of Broadway, Virginia, in respecting the convictions of Kline, wrote the *Messenger* without forwarding an accompanying picture: "...Bro. Kline, like many of the Brethren of the day, was conscientiously opposed to the taking of likenesses, and any attempt at a picture of him would not be true to the original, and anything but pleasing to him, were he living, or to his friends who know him and remain." Hays estimated Kline to stand five feet, six inches tall and weighing near one hundred seventy pounds and, like Niswander, described hair color, facial features, and voice timbre. The predominant theme of Hays' remembrance, however, was how the simplicity of Kline comprised his greatness. Kline's trademark felt hat and blue denim suit resembled his inner life and outer profession; all were "simple in form and color, and free from all ornamentation." In fact, Hays argued, a preoccupation with the physical presence of Kline would only detract from the memory of his true spiritual strengths: "There was nothing attractive about him except it be his unwavering devotion to duty and the solidity of his character." Pointing to the "home feeling" and "consistency of life" that accompanied Kline's personality, Hays regarded Kline as a model worthy of imitation: "Here is the picture of a well-spent life, and this way is open to all." The fiftieth anniversary of the war with its Blue-Gray veterans' reunions and battlefield remembrances may have compelled Brethren to collect extensive reminiscences of their greatest Civil War figure. If, however, Brethren clamored for extraordinary heroic details concerning John Kline, those few remaining individuals who did remember Kline represented him in an older Brethren language of "unattractive" simplicity, a portrayal only reinforcing a status of religious outsider.¹⁷

John Kline memorials continued in Brethren circles deep into the second half of the twentieth century. Musicians created more songs about Kline, including a num-

ber entitled "The Ballad of John Kline," written by composer Andy Murray. This Kline ballad borrowed liberally from the early-1960s Jimmy Dean hit "Big Bad John" as it compared Kline's small physical stature ("Little John") to his spiritual standing ("... little John Kline was a great big man—big

The predominant theme of Hays' remembrance, however, was how the simplicity of Kline comprised his greatness.

John"). As the centennial of his assassination arrived in 1964, Kline also found himself as the subject of a children's book entitled *The Middle Man*. Being a piece of children's literature, the book understandably avoided the delicate subject of Kline's violent death. The conclusion, however, left no doubt that Kline was both a great historical wartime figure and a spiritual exemplar: "And so John Kline rode Nell in peacetime and in the middle of the war to visit people, to heal people, and to tell people that God loves everyone. John Kline was full of God's love for everyone. He was God's middle man." In June 1997, the Linville Creek Church of the Brethren hosted a three-day John Kline Bicentennial Celebration (the 200th anniversary of Kline's birth) filled with historical reminiscence and family-friendly recreational activities. Young children crafted John Kline necklaces and created salt maps detailing John Kline's missionary travels, while adult attendees listened to workshops on herbal medicine and blacksmithing, chatted with a John Kline impersonator roaming the grounds, and experienced a dinner theatre presentation entitled "The Final Journey of John Kline." That same year, a small but dedicated group

of horse and Kline enthusiasts in Rockingham County founded the John Kline Memorial Riders. Over the last two decades, the Kline Riders have frequently embarked on horse rides seeking to revive the historical memory of Kline throughout the Shenandoah Valley region.¹⁸

Seen in this perspective, John Kline provided a bridge from American Brethren back to the Radical Reformation.

ALL of this celebration of John Kline in word, song, and ritual prompts the question: Was Kline truly a martyr? Which conceptual construction of “martyrdom” is most helpful in evaluating Kline? What differentiated Kline from John Bowman, another Brethren wartime casualty, or other peace church members who experienced physical pain, underwent psychological anguish, or lost valuable property during the war? A helpful means of qualitatively appraising the validity of martyrdom can be found in *Salvation at Stake*, a study written by Brad Gregory examining Protestant, Catholic, and Anabaptist martyrs of the sixteenth century. Gregory offers four “prerequisites for martyrdom,” which, although focused on the Reformation era, remain useful criteria for confirming or denying the martyrdom of Kline. First, Gregory states, “...the notion of martyrdom must exist and be available to contemporaries.” For the Brethren, two sources of “martyrdom notions” served as plausible inspiration for the rhetorical elevation of Kline. Their theological roots in Anabaptism gave Brethren both knowledge of printed martyrologies, such as *Martyrs Mirror*, and belief in the

long-held Anabaptist tenet that obedience to God necessarily resulted in earthly suffering. Seen in this perspective, John Kline provided a bridge from American Brethren back to the Radical Reformation. A more contemporary and secular source of martyr conceptualizations, however, existed in the Civil War military monuments and memorial days pervading postbellum America. As demonstrated by “The Lonely Grove” and “He Died at His Post,” Brethren possessed a familiarity with the language of sacrifice of life spoken at Decoration Day observances and monument dedications, and appropriated this distinctly American language of martyrdom to serve their own needs. John Kline not only died for his faith, but died the death of a Civil War soldier: violent, sudden, and alone.¹⁹

As a second martyrdom prerequisite, Brad Gregory explains, “There must be people willing to punish the heterodox with death.” Both John Kline’s nonresistant faith and his stances against slavery and secession placed him outside of Confederate religious and sociopolitical “orthodoxy.” If eyewitnesses are correct, those hostile towards Kline made highly visible and audible personal threats towards him in an environment where, by all accounts, nothing less than anarchy prevailed by the summer of 1864. Thus, from the beginning of the war (if not earlier), John Kline had foes, but the political, legal, and economic deterioration of the Shenandoah Valley in the last year of the war made violently “punishing the heterodox” simpler. Thirdly, Gregory argues, “There must be people willing to die for their religious convictions.” According to Kline’s diary, on May 31, 1864, while dining at the home of George Cowger in West Virginia, Kline informed the dinner guests, “I am threatened; they may take my life, but I do not fear them; they can only kill my body.” Even if Kline’s remark is apocryphal, evidence still confirms that a) someone with Confederate sympathies issued well-publi-

cized threats against Kline, b) Kline knew of these threats, and c) Kline did nothing to alter his actions or beliefs in light of these threats (e.g., refusing to travel to the North for Annual Meeting). Finally, Gregory's fourth stipulation coincides with the main argument of this article: "There must be survivors who view those executed for their religious convictions as martyrs." In his edited version of the Kline journal, Benjamin Funk positioned John Kline as an intermediary between divinity and humanity. As a historical figure, Kline's name deserved inclusion on "the list of great men," according to Funk. The circumstances of his death, however, seemed to place Kline in another realm as a spiritual being: "We saw him, not as Elisha saw Elijah in sight, ascend to heaven, but with the eye of faith we saw him clothed in a celestial body, and with the ear of faith we heard the welcome: 'Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.'" The Civil War thus provided the Brethren with the means to practice an ancient form of religious veneration within the context of wartime commemoration familiar to postbellum Americans.²⁰

The controversy in recent years over Confederate monuments and their removal proves that Civil War memory has never

fully drifted out of American consciousness. In the public spaces of New Orleans, Richmond, Memphis, and other Southern locales, the question "How should the Civil War be remembered?" continues to arouse fierce debate. Incongruous as it may sound, the Brethren, with their long tradition of nonresistance, staked a claim to the bloody terrain of Civil War remembrance. In the immediate postbellum era and beyond, the Brethren remembered the murder of John Kline as an unmistakable wartime casualty, the Brethren equivalent of losing an Abraham Lincoln or a Stonewall Jackson. At the same time, Kline's death constituted a true martyrdom, death by execution because of and for the good of the faith. Even as the Civil War introduced new social, political, economic, and technological phases of American modernity, Brethren combed the past to appropriate the language of canonization. The life of John Kline may have made him a saint in Brethren circles, but his death made him an American martyr. ♦

Aaron D. Jerviss is a lecturer of history at Johnson University in Tennessee. He is a graduate of Ashland University, Ashland Theological Seminary, and holds a Ph.D. in history from the University of Tennessee.

1. Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 52, but all of chapter 2, "The Late Medieval Influence," proves helpful; Fernando G. Cartland, *Southern Heroes or the Friends in Wartime* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Riverside Press, 1895), 191–94.
2. Cartland, *Southern Heroes*, 191–94, 143–44.
3. S. F. Sanger and D. Hays, *The Olive Branch of Peace and Good Will to Men, Anti-War History of the Brethren and Mennonites, the Peace People of the South, During the Civil War, 1861–1865* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Publishing House, 1907), 96–97; D. L. Miller and Galen B. Royer, *Some Who Led, or Fathers in the Church of the Brethren Who Have Passed Over* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Publishing House, 1912), 87–89.
4. Annie Zigler Bowman, "Memories of Elder John Kline," *Gospel Messenger* (April 18, 1936): 20; Benjamin Funk, *Life and Labors of Elder John Kline, the Martyr Missionary, Collated from his Diary by Benjamin Funk* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Publishing House, 1900), 479. Civil War historian Edward L. Ayers refers to the Shenandoah Valley of 1864 as "notoriously chaotic," a place where the line between "regular" military activity and guerrilla activity blurred. See Ayers, *The Thin Light of Freedom: The Civil War and Emancipation in the Heart of America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2017), 184.
5. *Gospel Visitor* 12:1 (January 1862): 30; *Gospel Visitor* 12:3 (March 1862): 92–93.
6. *Christian Family Companion* 1: Specimen Number 2 (October 4, 1864): 9; *Gospel Visitor* 14:8 (August 1864): 228; *Christian Family Companion* 1:15 (April 11, 1865): 119.
7. *Gospel Visitor* 14:8 (August 1864): 228.
8. *Christian Family Companion* 1:9 (February 28, 1865): 71; *Brethren's Family Almanac* (1894): 15; Ray A. Neff, *Valley of the Shadow* (Terre Haute, IN: Rana Publications, 1987).

9. "The Prisoner's Hymn," date and author unknown (emphasis mine). Box H, Folder 15. Durnbaugh Research Collection, Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies. Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania.
10. Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865–1920* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980), 29; Funk, *Life and Labors*, iv.
11. Charles Nair, "John Kline Among His Brethren," unpublished manuscript, Donald Durnbaugh Papers, Box 1, Folder 24, Brethren Historical Library and Archives. Elgin, Illinois.
12. Funk, *Life and Labors*, 479–80; Sanger and Hays, *Olive Branch*, 7, 126–27; Nair, "Kline Among His Brethren"; *Brethren's Family Almanac* (1898): 17.
13. *Brethren's Family Almanac* (1894): 3–17.
14. "The Lonely Grove," Words and Music by J. Senger (date unknown). Box H, Folder 15 (John Kline). Donald F. Durnbaugh Research Collection. Young Center. Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania; Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 9, but for a richer understanding, see Faust's chapter 1, "Dying," pp. 3–31. In his lengthy manuscript concerning John Kline, Charles Nair seemed to dispute the characterization of Kline's "lonely" dying. According to Nair, "A man told me he was a boy then, and ran up over the hill through the woods nearly a mile from home to the place and there was a crowd already ahead of him and he did not get to see the face of the dead, as he was already covered with leafy branches cut from the trees." Nair, "Kline Among His Brethren."
15. Funk, *Life and Labors*, 480; Miller and Royer, *Some Who Led*, 47; "He Died at His Post," by J.W. Holman, www.civilwarpoetry.org/union/soldierlife/post.html. Accessed November 24, 2018. For more on the significance attached to soldiers' last words, see Faust, *Republic of Suffering*, 10–18.
16. Exodus 20:4 NASB; *Gospel Messenger* 61:23 (June 8, 1912): 358; *Gospel Messenger* 61:18 (May 4, 1912): 280.
17. *Gospel Messenger* 61:23 (June 8, 1912): 358.
18. "The Ballad of John Kline," Andy Murray (date unknown). Box H, Folder 15. Durnbaugh Research Collection. Young Center, Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania; Dorothy Brandt Davis and Sara Elizabeth Davis, *The Middle Man* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 1964, 1992); John Kline Bicentennial Celebration registration packet. Box DD (Durnbaugh Lectures and Publications), Folder 32 (John Kline Bicentennial Celebration). Durnbaugh Research Collection, Young Center. Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania; *John Kline Memorial Riders* pamphlet, mailed by Emmert F. Bittinger of Broadway, Virginia to the author, April 2011.
19. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake*, 26. I am indebted to Denise Kettering-Lane of Bethany Theological Seminary for bringing Gregory's monograph to my attention.
20. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake*, 26; Funk, *Life and Labors*, 479, vi, iii–iv.