

This Republic of Suffering (Book Review)

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Drew Gilpin Faust's *This Republic of Suffering* offers a novel approach to a subject omnipresent in Civil War studies, but never confronted quite so squarely: death. She examines both the physical side of death and also the broader cultural implications of the "Harvest of Death" that took over half a million American lives from 1861 – 1865. She writes that, "Americans had to identify – find, invent, create – the means and the mechanisms to manage more than half a million dead: their deaths, their bodies, their loss. How they accomplished that task reshaped their individual lives – and deaths – and their culture." (xviii)

The first chapters deal primarily with the physical responses: dying, killing, burying. The later chapters deal with survivor's attempts to cope with an amount of killing unprecedented in American history, addressing both psychological and spiritual responses and more physical ones, such as the development of the National Cemetery system for Union soldiers. Military historians often discuss the topic of "military revolutions" or "revolutions in military affairs" when referring to tactical or technological changes. Faust describes a kind of revolution in caring for the dead, as the care of the dead became the responsibility not just of friends and family members, but of the entire nation. Of particular importance is the idea of the "Good Death." In the nineteenth century, dying was a kind of art form, and one died well when at peace with God, conscious of the significance of the event to come, among one's family members, who were present to hear the significant last words of the decedent. Faust stresses how the war disrupted this tradition of death, noting that, "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." (9) One of the strengths of *This Republic of Suffering* is the way Faust shows how soldiers and their families attempted to cling to this tradition, adapting it even in the face of disorienting change. If time allowed, dying soldiers would write last letters home, or comrades of the dead or dying would write letters describing the deceased's last moments and manner of death. Still, all too often, the time, place, and

manner of death of those killed during the Civil War would remain unknown. Throughout the book is a sense of the dehumanization that increased as the war progressed. While in peacetime, those who died would be buried with varying degrees of ceremony; the vast carnage of Civil War battles did not allow for such niceties. After many battles the dead, if buried at all, would be thrown into large pits or ravines, areas where, all too often, the elements or animals would expose the dead once more. Even when the dead could be buried, often the bodies had decomposed to such a degree that they would need to be hauled to their graves with bayonets bent into the shape of hooks, such as one would use to haul a piece of meat. This wearing away of the humanity of those involved in the war was not limited to the battlefield. Some hospital administrators failed to record the names of those who died, because, "death had become too commonplace even to take note of." (145)

Although her topic may sound morbid, Faust does not indulge in excessive descriptions of how Civil War weapons killed or how one died from diseases such as dysentery. Faust describes in vivid detail the consequences of delay or refusal to bury the dead after an action that killed thousands. Still, she does evoke the continual presence of death and the dead; especially in the southern states, where most of the fighting took place, the dead remained a physical presence throughout the war and after.

This is not a statistical study, but the numbers that Faust cites are some of the most arresting facts presented in the book. She offers the big picture of just how many deaths occurred, setting the numbers in a twenty-first century context: "The Civil War's rate of death, its incidence in comparison with the size of the American population, was six times that of World War II. A similar rate, about 2 percent, in the United States today would mean six million fatalities." (xi) Equally jarring, though are the specific details that she offers. Describing the aftermath of the battle of Gettysburg, July 1-3, 1863, Faust notes that the day after the battle, "an estimated six million pounds of human and animal carcasses lay strewn across the field in the summer heat, and a town of 2,400 grappled with 22,000 wounded who remained alive but in desperate condition." (69) In spite of the numbing nature of such numbers, Faust does not lose sight of the individuals swept up in the war. She has a remarkable eye for pathetic anecdotes, such as Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.'s writing his name on a slip of paper after being wounded at Antietam in 1862, in an effort to retain his identity, even if death came to him.

In a field as heavily worked as Civil War studies, Faust manages to break new ground by addressing a commonplace topic in a new way and setting her subject in the larger context of what the war meant to America. This is a fine work that will be of interest to students of the Civil War and of American History.

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Works Cited

Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008.