

For what?

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THIS REPUBLIC OF SUFFERING. Death and the American Civil War. By Drew Gilpin Faust. 346pp. Knopf. \$27.95 - 978 0 375 40404 7.

On the day after Christmas, 1866, Edmund Whitman, chief quartermaster for the Military Division of Tennessee, received orders that must have cast a pall over his holidays. His superiors had chosen him to survey a vast swath of the defeated Confederacy - parts of Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and Tennessee - as well as the border state of Kentucky. Whitman was to comb battlefields and the surrounding areas in the region, looking for “scattered graves of Union soldiers”, with the goal of compiling a comprehensive list of every fallen northerner “buried in the Rebel States”.

Recognizing the enormity of the task that faced him, Whitman got straight to work. He first gathered intelligence, sending out a query to veterans of campaigns that had taken place in his target area, asking them to remember the worst moments of their service: when and where their comrades had fallen. The response shocked him. A dam seemed to have burst; news of burial sites poured in. His request, Whitman later recalled, had struck a “sympathetic chord” and “exerted an influence in the creation of the public sentiment which justified and sustained the subsequent measures adopted”. Those “subsequent measures” included, over the course of the next three years, Whitman travelling thousands of miles to visit hallowed ground regionwide, and then disinterring and reburying more than 100,000 bodies in new national cemeteries memorializing the Union’s war dead.

For Drew Gilpin Faust, President of Harvard University and author of *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, Whitman’s work represents one among many ways that the conflict remade the United States: politically, as the federal government assumed broad new powers and responsibilities; and culturally, by fostering heightened respect for the sanctity of the individual, both alive or, far more often in this sombre study, dead. Of the logistics, by turns macabre and mundane, surrounding the national cemeteries’ creation, for instance, Faust writes: “The program’s extensiveness, its cost, its location in national rather than state government, and its connection with the most personal dimension of individuals’ lives all would have been unimaginable before the war created its legions of dead”. Those legions, hundreds of thousands strong, were “a constituency of the slain and their mourners”, venerated ghosts and survivors who altered “the very direction of the nation and its obligations”.

That the Civil War first destroyed and then reconstituted the US is hardly a new idea. It is, in fact, something of a commonplace for scholars, who typically locate the war at the centre of the national narrative. The conflict, in this view, hinges the early and modern periods of American history. This conventional periodization rests on a foundation similar to the one Faust builds in her book. The war and its aftermath, the argument goes, fuelled explosive growth within a federal apparatus that began to resemble the one still in place today: the draft exerted unprecedented control over the lives and labour of Americans; an income tax reached into their wallets, while a national currency centralized the economy; the Morrill Act ensured that their children could be educated at public, land-grant universities; and the Pacific Railroad Act helped them settle the West, just to name a few pieces of the era’s landmark legislation. Beyond that, the war, which only briefly splintered the Republic, also permanently eradicated slavery. By excising that cancer

from the body politic, the conflict was midwife to what Abraham Lincoln, while dedicating the national cemetery at Gettysburg, called “a new birth of freedom”.

Faust engages with abolition in *This Republic of Suffering*, but she focuses, as her title hints, on agony not liberation: lives lost and ruined by the war rather than those lifted up by emancipation. She also distinguishes between retrospective and contemporary understandings of the conflict. “The Civil War”, she argues, “matters to us today because it ended slavery and helped to define the meanings of freedom, citizenship and equality. It established a newly centralized nation-state and launched it on a trajectory of economic expansion and world influence.” For those Americans who lived in and through the Civil War, however, “the texture of the experience, its warp and woof, was the presence of death”. Faust, then, agrees with Lincoln that the war produced modern America, but it was a nation born not of expanding liberty, but out of death.

Accordingly, *This Republic of Suffering* begins where many histories end: with the act of dying. Approximately 620,000 people, 2 per cent of the population, fell during the war. “The work of death (was) Civil War America’s most fundamental and most demanding undertaking.” Eight chapters chronicle that work. Faust first examines the soldier’s quest for a “good death” - a demise leading from the battlefield to the gates of heaven - before turning next to killing. To fight the war, the Union and Confederacy relied on volunteer armies made up of troops who had to forget a lifetime’s worth of “religious and emotional constraints” before they could pull the trigger. In short, “the first challenge for Civil War soldiers to surmount was the Sixth Commandment”. So successful were these efforts, Faust contends, that soldiers became inured to violence. “Human life diminished sharply in value”, killing became easier, “the living risked becoming as dehumanized as the dead”.

In the book’s remaining chapters, Faust examines how death radiated out from the battlefield; she depicts the war’s broader impact in tones bleak enough to satisfy a devout Quaker. Her material on burial practices, for instance, reveals that the slain at Gettysburg comprised “six million pounds of human and animal carcasses”. In writing about identifying bodies, she notes that four in ten soldiers who died remained “unknown”, leaving families wandering, sometimes for months, struggling to ascertain their loved ones’ fates. Faust’s chapters on mourning, grappling with the conflict’s meaning, and the effort to account for and remember the dead, feature grim parades of tragic anecdotes: of children who died - including the sons of General Grant and President Lincoln - during the war; of the burning of Manhattan’s Colored Orphan Asylum during the draft riots; of survivors driven mad with grief; of the eschatological and epistemological contortions required of a culture trying to make sense of so much killing and dying.

Faust’s fifty-six plates punctuate her text and deepen her argument. Black and-white photographs, engravings, drawings and paintings all depict the horror of war: an embalmer working on a fallen soldier, whose cadaver rests on a makeshift gurney, a door propped between two barrels; carrion birds preparing to feast on bloated carcasses littering the site of a recent skirmish; a hospital ward filled with broken bodies convalescing away from the front; and members of a burial party, men so stooped with fatigue that they appear to sag into the soil along with the corpses they are interring. More powerful still are photographs that underscore the scale of the mortality: hundreds of fresh graves, the soil still damp, planted in rural Virginia; a line of dead bodies stretching into the middle distance after the Battle of Antietam, looking like a road macadamized with human flesh; and a regiment of white headstones arrayed at the foot of a memorial to the Confederate dead at the Vicksburg cemetery.

The United States has twin creation stories - the Revolution and the Civil War - a national mythology rendered especially unusual because the second does not eclipse the first. Initially, there was the split with England, which elevated the Founding Fathers into America’s pantheon of secular saints. But the Revolution was incomplete, for the Constitution, though sanctified in historical memory, contained within it the seeds of the nation’s dissolution: acknowledging with silence the institution of slavery (neither the word “slave” nor “slavery” appears in the Constitution) and legitimizing slaveholding (with the compromise to count individual slaves as three-fifths of a person when apportioning Congressional representation). As a result, three-quarters of a century later came the Civil War, a conflict that turned the homespun Abraham Lincoln into a Christ figure. Lincoln, every American child learns in school, died so that the nation might live.

In American memory, the Civil War finished the good work begun by the Founders with the Revolution. And if, in both cases, the United States was consecrated in blood - at the Boston Massacre, during the siege at Yorktown, in the railroad cut at Gettysburg, or along the trenches outside Petersburg - violence is less central in recalling these enduring national myths than is heroism and sacrifice, the founding and preservation of a country (again borrowing text from Lincoln's Gettysburg Address) "conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal". By arguing that death rather than freedom defined the Civil War, Faust demythologizes the conflict, as Paul Fussell and others long ago did for the First World War, and Nicholson Baker has lately tried to do for the Second (in *Human Smoke*, reviewed in the TLS, June 13). That such a project comes at a time which finds the US mired in a mismanaged war of choice makes sense. Still, Faust's reappraisal of one of the sacrosanct episodes of the nation's military history - producing anti-war scholarship during a time of war, in other words - demonstrates her courage.

Her book is also deeply researched and she has turned up remarkable evidence.

But a relentless focus on the gory rather than the glory sometimes obscures more than it reveals. For example, Chandra Manning suggests, in *What This Cruel War Was Over* (351pp. Knopf. \$26.95. 978 0 307 26482 9), that soldiers, black and white, wearing blue and gray, understood that they fought over slavery. The association of liberty with the conflict is not just a case of romantic memory smoothing history's rough edges - particularly for the 4 million slaves freed as a result of the fighting. Reducing the Civil War to death also risks universalizing a conflict that the people of different regions experienced differently. The South, in short, suffered disproportionately: nearly 20 per cent of its white men of military age died, and, by freeing the slaves, the 13th Amendment removed the cornerstone of the region's economy and the foundation of its social order. And then there was the land. When Edmund Whitman toured the ruined districts of the former Confederacy, he called the region "a vast charnel house". Nobody would have said the same about the North, whose environs had been relatively insulated from the fighting, and which, by

1865, was thriving economically. The North imposed its will and vision for the future on the South. Wars are not only about death. They are also about winners and losers.