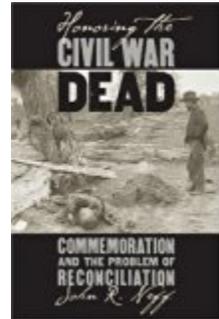


John R. Neff. *Honoring the Civil War Dead: Commemoration and the Problem of Reconciliation.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005. xiv + 328 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1366-3.

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Published on H-CivWar (January, 2007)



Remembering Death among Us

Even before the last shots of the Civil War were fired, monuments to the dead heroes of both sides were already laid and countless others were planned. John R. Neff's book explores the task of memory undertaken by Civil War survivors from both sides and examines their commemorative relics in pursuit of answers about national reconciliation. Although the nation reconciled on a functional legal and political basis nearly 150 years ago, the persistent scars and divergent interpretations within American society confirm that reconciliation has not been achieved on all levels and most likely never will be. The story of the Civil War has been inscribed in stone throughout hundreds of American cemeteries for the past 140 years. Neff claims that the number of Civil War monuments erected "far outstrip[ped] any other period in our history" (p. 1), but his assumption may be outdated. Although a comprehensive survey of Civil War monuments has never been undertaken on a national level, a recent study conducted by the National Cemetery Administration showed that the number of World War II monuments erected in their cemeteries has surpassed the number of Civil War monuments.[1] Neff's claims about the proliferation of Civil War monuments was certainly true in 1900. Both sides of Civil War survivors had their distinctive heroes and created a mythology to explain either their "Lost Cause" or "Cause Victorious" (pp. 7-8). Despite the Union's lead in financing more monuments than the South during the post-war period, the memory of the now-defunct Confederacy persists to this day. Neff's book explores the full gamut of death, buri-

als, rituals, and commemoration during the war and in the immediate post-war period, from the bottom-up perspective. A raging fear of every soldier was that of being buried as an unknown and their families not knowing where they were buried. That little over half of all the Civil War dead were buried as "knowns," shows that their fears were realized. Neff reveals why this happened. The book takes a fascinating look at this and other psychological, political, social, and cultural issues that soldiers and their families confronted. He integrates analysis of Mathew B. Brady's photography, Winslow Homer's paintings, Walt Whitman's and Theodore O'Hara's poetry, and other commemorative elements such as reunions, the creation of Memorial Day and the establishment of veteran organizations such as the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR)—all very complex and diverse topics in their own right—into an enlightening and digestible narrative. Neff also shows how the war, the unprecedented number of dead, the death and funeral train of President Lincoln, and, later, the death and funeral of Jefferson Davis, impacted and effectively changed the social death rituals of the era. During the Civil War, death evolved from being a very private and personal family experience into very "public, shared, and tangible" national events (p.14). Most notable is Neff's detailed chapter on the national cemeteries. Aside from Arlington National Cemetery and the select communities with national cemeteries within their boundaries, most Americans are unaware of how these unique entities—national cemeteries—came into existence. Neff's statement that Arlington was the

“great symbolic center of national honor and sacrifice” was a bit premature because that was not its status during the Civil War. Arlington did not become the great national symbol until after the Spanish American War. He describes some of the atrocities that led to the creation of this first-ever national system of cemeteries in 1862; their designs were shaped by the passions and sentiments of the men placed in charge of burying the dead on the battlefield and after the war. His mention of the two primary assistant quartermasters, Captains E. B. Whitman and James M. Moore (not Jason, as named in the book [pp. 127, 190-191]), who oversaw the gruesome Federal Reburial program, is especially noteworthy. Moore supervised most of the burial work in Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina, and South Carolina; Whitman supervised burials in the remaining states of the South and Midwest. Although Quartermaster Gen. Montgomery Meigs was given credit for much of the national cemetery work, Whitman and Moore did most of the detailed field work. Neff is to be commended for giving them full and proper credit (pp. 126-144). The issue of race and commemoration in the national cemeteries is only lightly addressed and the author would have benefited readers by delving further into the matter. He rightly attributes the segregation of the U.S. Colored Troops in national cemeteries to the fact that their regiments were segregated from other units—not due to any specific military order or preference of the burial supervisor or parties. He discusses the complexities of burying colored troops in Arlington National Cemetery during Meigs’s tenure, but he does not explore, in depth, the lack of monuments to U.S. Colored Troops in cemeteries overall. National cemeteries were established largely in the South during and immediately following the war. They were clear and blatant reminders of who the victor was. While the “Union soldiers were laid to rest within stone walls, neatly arcing rows, the Confederates remained scattered across farmland and churchyard” (p. 120). That the South lacked funds after the war to establish their own commemorative cemetery system may have contributed substantially

to their need to fuel the Lost Cause mythology and elevate their soldiers to heroes (p. 158). The question of whether “true” reconciliation had been achieved came to a head when the burial of Confederate soldiers was first allowed in a national cemetery. This took place under special circumstances at Arlington National Cemetery in 1901. Neff could have pursued this very interesting topic further, but he stops short on his research of Confederate burials by stating that “in the 1930s ... Union veterans continued to find interment in national cemeteries, but Confederate veterans did not” (p. 235). Had he pursued his research further, he would have found that in March 1938, Confederates were authorized to be buried in three national cemeteries: Arlington, Springfield, Missouri, and Little Rock, Arkansas. Throughout the book, the symbolic value of the dead soldier is evident and shown to have served many purposes in the war’s aftermath. Now, as an embedded part of our national identity and culture, that symbolism and its accompanying ideology continue to shape policy, thought, and action (pp. 26-37). Nearly 150 years after the war, monuments continue to be built to honor the Civil War dead in the modern era—even as our country fights and buries the dead of a current war. As we honor those that we never knew, reinterpretation of that historic revolution is now somewhat marred by a romantic cultural mythology about the war and its warriors. Overall, Neff’s book is an excellent resource for anyone studying the Civil War and especially for those interested in the culture of death and commemoration in America. He pools his information from many disciplines and presents it in a comprehensible narrative that would benefit scholars, laypeople, and students. His book will help many to understand how America’s reverence and policies to reward its soldiers and veterans fully bloomed during and after the Civil War. Note [1]. *Memorials Inventory Project (MIP) Final Report, January 2006*. Washington, D.C.: National Cemetery Administration, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Available from <http://www.cem.va.gov/cem/hist/mipJan06pg1.asp>, page 7, accessed 10/29/2006.

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Citation: Darlene Richardson. Review of Neff, John R., *Honoring the Civil War Dead: Commemoration and the Problem of Reconciliation*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. January, 2007.

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