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Frances M. Clarke. *War Stories: Suffering and Sacrifice in the Civil War North.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. xiv + 251 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-10862-9.

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Redeeming the Horror of War

Historians generally agree that the Civil War was a modern war, but according to Frances M. Clarke, the stories Northerners told about it were not bitter tales of disillusionment. Rather, most Civil War stories trumpeted romantic notions of patriotism, sentiment, and heroic action, an idealistic counterpoint to the kinds of literary horror that other modern wars generally produced. Clarke, a senior lecturer in history at the University of Sydney, explores the ways in which Northerners constructed stories about the Civil War and counters the studies of previous historians. While some scholars have found that the experience of war reshaped intellectual life by pushing American thought into new, secular, pragmatic, material approaches, others have looked at other writings, especially those of lesser-known authors and the unpublished correspondence of soldiers, and found continuity, arguing that the Civil War did not mark a dramatic cultural change. "Rather than choosing between change and continuity," Clarke starts "from the paradox that in the midst of change a great deal remained the same." She argues that Northerners "mobilized stories about suffering in response to some of the war's most wrenching transformations," and by "appropriating and using idealized tales of suffering and sympathy," they were able "to cope with loss, define personal and national identity, achieve wartime unity, and give meaning to their experience" (p. 5).

Clarke begins with an examination of the idea of suffering in mid-nineteenth-century America. Here, she brings together strands of Enlightenment liberalism with Protestant Christian theology, points to class differences and sees shifts in thinking over the antebellum decades, and puts sympathy in the context of sentimentality. Clarke argues that "there is always a politics to sympathy," and employs the familiar and well-worn conceptual triad of race, class, and gender to explain the ways in which white, middle-class Northerners felt about suffering (p. 25). She also applies the often-used concepts of republicanism to show that Northern patriotism involved the sacrifice of self-interest for the good of the Republic, finding the roots of wartime nationalism in the prewar ideological framework that animated much of American politics.

Northerners understood martyrdom and heroism in gendered terms, as ideas of masculinity provided them with the lens to see and explain wartime deaths. Bravery, duty, toughness, bravado, all related to manhood and self-conscious thinking about the meaning of suffering, sacrifice, death, and heroism. Dismissing the work of scholars who usually aim "to break down" the nineteenth-century conventions of idealizing death in favor of "providing more matter-of-fact accounts of the war, in which soldiers were not all brave, deaths were often inglorious, and home-front divisions were readily apparent," Clarke places those conventions within the context of the times (p. 29). Far from simply idealizing difficult facts and situations, Northerners used their stories to comprehend and explain the horrors of war in terms that made sense to them. "They did not just tell their idealized story; they *lived* it, investing tremendous emotional energy in creating a tale of heroic martyrdom anew, making it speak to their own situations and embody their particular desires and beliefs" (p. 30). Drawing on their cultural milieu, Northerners worked to interpret death as inspirational, using "resources that were largely unavailable to later generations. Foremost among them were a steadfast providentialism and an abiding sense that suffering held the potential to motivate, edify, and uplift" (p. 50).

If dead soldiers became martyrs, sick and wounded men embraced "heroic status both as warriors and as worthy sufferers" (p. 54). Here, Clarke finds that Northern patriots employed the cause of Union and religious doctrines to explain why men in the military came down with disease or suffered wounds. They depicted South-

erners as depraved while extolling the virtues of Union men. Among those virtues towered exemplary suffering, facing pain and anguish with good humor and steadfast devotion to the cause. Morality mingled with courage and self-control as soldiers and their families defined what it meant to suffer a wound or to fall ill while serving the nation. Northern stories also created meaning for those who worked to help the wounded and dying soldiers. Clarke argues that "home and family were the wellspring of patriotism according to most middle-class Unionists," and the "mass of Northern volunteers"–both soldiers and the women and men who strove to help them as civilian volunteers–"were true believers." Once again, such notions were gendered, as they believed "in the power of feminine influence to rouse men's better natures and transform their souls," allowing Northerners to view "women's efforts to keep home in men's thoughts as a sacred duty, at once serving political, military, and religious ends." Indeed, "Northern voluntary efforts were fundamentally shaped by middle-class convictions about the significance of home and maternal influences." Thus, "volunteers did not just tell stories about the importance of preserving emotional connections with men, they formed efforts designed to do exactly that" (p. 85). Once again, Clarke seeks the middle ground between contending scholars. While some have seen the voluntary efforts as examples of self-interested elites effectively using managerial skills in a transition to professionalization, others have argued that the volunteer organizations provided a means for women to resist "attempts to systematize and nationalize their voluntarism." Criticizing both sides of the scholarly debate for being too quick to dismiss stories of "voluntarism as a labor of love as mere cant," Clarke draws on both interpretations in showing how the Civil War experience resulted in changes and continuities in the conflicted world where gender roles and traditional authority met the realities of warfare (p. 86).

Once the war was over, Northerners used their stories of "Unionists' selfless patriotism and unstinting benevolence" as a "powerful rebuttal to charges of inhumanity" and to relate "the lessons that middle-class Northerners draw the war." They interpreted their victory as "an endorsement of white unity and morality," which allowed them to "overlook the fissures opened up by the conflict, such as mounting class conflict or the unequal distribution of suffering and distress." In making the individualism of their efforts the focus of the story by emphasizing "the centrality of voluntarism to national character," Northern storytellers "were also quick to urge self-help as the solution to the massive hardships faced by ex-slaves." Clarke argues that Northerners chose to turn away "from such troubling issues" in favor of setting "their sights on restoring America's battered image in a global context" (p. 116). Nationalism inspired the "noble monuments" built in Northern stories that remembered the war in ways that downplayed criticism, weakness, and conflict in favor of victory, strength, and unity (p. 113). But visible reminders of the horrors of the war existed in the form of maimed veterans and Northerners again went back to their cultural well in hopes of explaining such suffering in a comforting and meaningful way. Employing religion, patriotism, and gender, Northerners celebrated those who sacrificed "a limb for the cause they championed, marking themselves as ideal citizen-soldiers" (p. 146). But those who needed continual assistance and failed to get on with their lives were seen as failures who suffered from deeper character flaws. Thus, the triumphant nation celebrated its victory.

Clarke cleverly places her analysis between contending scholars and artfully draws on the insights of both sides to offer a new view of how Northerners interpreted and remembered the Civil War. In doing so, she extends and challenges the work of historians like George M. Frederickson (*The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union* [1965]) and Drew Gilpin Faust (*This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* [2008]), as well as a host of others.[1] One wishes that she might have done more with memory, as her work demonstrates the vitality of a Unionist vision that some scholars have tended to forget in their haste to emphasize reconciliation, emancipation, and the Lost Cause. Clarke's use of the tired old triad of race, class, and gender shows that that now-rusty pump of the New Left can still bring useful analysis to the surface. Ultimately, however, it results in a rather predictable conclusion that may very well undercut some of the insights she offers–most obviously, by placing the stories Northerners told about themselves to themselves in the context of their world. To say that they allowed race, class, and gender to trump some other, more progressive vision of events is to ask them to be other than they were. Cynical minds in later generations may dismiss the sentimentality and idealism of those Civil War stories as just so much sap covering the real meaning of what went on. But, shaped by other wars, those later cynics rarely experienced the horror of conflict themselves. Thus, they might very well find fault with those who managed to redeem suffering and sacrifice in the nationalism of the Civil War.

Note

[1]. Clarke cites many scholarly works, but these two authors offered important books that will be familiar to most scholars of the Civil War.

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