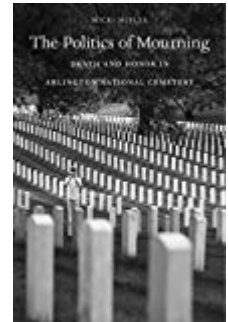


Micki McElya. *The Politics of Mourning: Death and Honor in Arlington National Cemetery.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016. 416 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-73724-2.



Reviewed by Katie Thompson

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On first glance, Micki McElya's *The Politics of Mourning: Death and Honor in Arlington National Cemetery* appears to be a history of the creation and development of the United States' most famous national cemetery. Very quickly, however, the reader realizes that this book is a much deeper analysis of how Arlington National Cemetery grew from a family home and plantation to the country's most sacred burial grounds, one that considers race, gender, memory, and politics. As a result, this work illuminates not only the history of the National Cemetery, but the society in which it developed.

Arlington did not begin as a place of sacred ritual; instead it began as a family home and plantation of paternalistic slavery. Many Americans know the foundation of the national cemetery: out of necessity and spite, soldiers dying from the American Civil War were buried on the estate that belonged to Confederate general Robert E. Lee and his family. Over time, the number of burials grew and, with its proximity to Washington DC, Arlington transformed into the largest and most

sacred of the country's national cemeteries. While that trajectory is roughly accurate, McElya paints the cemetery's history with far more complex layers that speak volumes about questions of race, gender, and national honor. The premise of McElya's book is that the "history of Arlington National Cemetery is necessarily the history of the legal, political, cultural, and affective relationships between American citizenship, belonging, and military service" in which various groups of Americans have sought inclusion (p. 8).

Arlington began with a tangled history of race between the white owners and black laborers who lived on that estate before and during the Civil War. This racial relationship complicated the use of the land during and after the war because Arlington hosted not only the seeds of the future national cemetery, but also Freedmen's Village, a contraband camp for former slaves seeking freedom. Issues of race, segregation, and future reconciliation shaped the development and design of the early cemetery as burials eventually took precedence over the Freedmen's Village, and sec-

tions remained segregated by race. Reunion also led to a Confederate section, which has been the subject of recent controversy. It was not until close to the turn of the twentieth century, with the repatriation of bodies from the Spanish-American War and war in the Philippines, that Arlington began to hold significance as a national symbol for military sacrifice and honor. This was solidified with the construction of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in response to the nation's inability to repatriate all the US dead from overseas. The Unknown is meant to represent the sacrifices and honor of all servicemen and -women lost in war, and thus serves as a symbolic unifier that places more emphasis on the importance of Arlington itself. Because the Unknown is meant to represent all American military, it became a symbol of inclusion that diverse Americans could claim. This has strengthened until today, when Arlington is viewed as the national symbol of military honor, sacrifice, and citizenship. Because of this developed meaning, various groups within American society—women, different racial and ethnic groups, social groups such as LGBT Americans—have sought inclusion in the nation's story of honorable citizenship through inclusion in Arlington through burials or memorials. Thus, McElya argues, "Since before its inception as a cemetery during the Civil War, Arlington has been the scene of pitched struggles over the use and shape of the place, struggles that have always been about the larger meanings of freedom, sacrifice, citizenship, honor, state authority, and the nation itself and about which bodies, alive and dead, are most representative, most capable and valuable, and most difficult to lose" (p. 10).

McElya's book deftly explores the interwoven threads of race relations, gender, national politics, memory and commemoration, and the development of Arlington into the national cemetery we know it as today. By examining the transformation of the Curtis-Lee Estate from family plantation to symbol of national importance, McElya reveals much about the racial, gendered, and politi-

cal tensions in American history from the end of the Civil War to the present. In a way, she re-humanizes the rows of white tombstones by illuminating the very human emotions, social expectations, and problems that shaped the cemetery. The book is structured chronologically, starting with the Arlington plantation before the Civil War and ending with the modern administration of the cemetery (and National Park site) and the 2010s scandal over cemetery management. Because of the long time span, McElya pulls from a large variety of letters, official records, media reports, and scholarly works to build her argument. My only criticism—and it is a very slight one—is that the book is very front-heavy. Almost half the book is dedicated to the time period before, during, and immediately after the Civil War, and then the chapters move quickly through the rest of the time period, focusing primarily on the main military conflicts that shaped the cemetery's development. As a Civil War historian, I greatly appreciated those first three chapters; however, it is a shame that the rest of the time span could not get the same detailed attention. Outside that very small imbalance, this book is a useful resource for any scholar studying the National Cemetery system, Arlington, race and gender politics in the period 1860 to the present, or the development of military citizenship. In addition, it is not inaccessible for general readers interested in Arlington or the burial of military servicemen.

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