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In *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes toward Death, 1799-1883*, Gary Laderman is concerned with the multiple ways antebellum northern Protestants understood and dealt with death and how those practices and beliefs were affected by the experience of the Civil War. He draws on diaries and letters, novels, painting, photography, medical histories, religious literature, and newspaper accounts to examine the changing social, spiritual, economic, and political issues surrounding the preparation of the dead for burial as well as to delineate the symbolic importance of dead bodies in nineteenth-century American culture.

According to Laderman, death was a fearful event for the ancestors of nineteenth-century northern Protestants and held an important position at the center of Puritan communal life. Puritan clergymen encouraged church members to view the deaths of family members and neighbors as reminders of the final departure of their own souls to heaven or hell. Because Puritans focused all their imaginative energies on the soul, the dead body itself was of little interest. At best, corpses were regarded as physical manifestations of human sin. Thus, Puritan funerals were austere and plain affairs.

As traditional Protestant views lost their authority in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, however, a multitude of competing beliefs about death, the human spirit, and the afterlife proliferated through the North. As these new views took hold, the dying person and the corpse assumed new importance in how individuals and communities dealt with death. Northern Protestants developed a number of rituals and practices surrounding the burial of the dead. These included the preparation of the corpse in the home by close relations, usually the women; a waiting period of one to three days while the body was “watched”, or waked; a public funeral sermon at the church or meetinghouse; formal transportation to the graveyard while church bells tolled; and internment or entombment in a designated place. Antebellum northerners developed this pattern of disposal of the dead, says Laderman, “to preserve their integrity, to treat them according to inherited conceptions of dignity, and to manage their remains in a manner that ensured familial or communal continuity” (p. 37).

As the conceptions of dying and death as reminders of human sin and corruptibility were abandoned, a new Romantic vision of death was embraced. This resulted in cultural practices and ideals that served to ameliorate the experience of death for the dying person as well as to ease the grief of the survivors. The most significant of these was the deathbed scene—a dramatically emotional spectacle in which the last moments of the dying person was scrutinized for signs of spiritual preparedness and the emotional pathos of the onlookers was valorized. As represented in sermons, literature, drama, and painting, the deathbed scene became the dominant feature of northern Protestant attitudes toward death.

By the 1830s, middle- and upper-class residents in Boston, New York, and other cities were developing their own elaborations of accepted funeral customs. They eschewed the simple funerals of the countryside for more embellished and dramatic spectacles that involved large numbers of mourners and complex dress codes and required the services of undertakers and other entrepreneurs. At the other end of the urban social scale, the disposal of the bodies of the city’s poor and indigent emerged as an increasingly significant problem for urban bureaucrats and medical officers. The difficulties of burying bodies in urban environments led to an awareness
that traditional burial practices—such as interring bodies in public squares—presented a danger to the health and hygiene of the city. In addition, deaths resulting from the epidemics that periodically attacked urban populations during the antebellum decades necessitated a pragmatic approach to dealing with corpses that did not allow for the niceties of tradition. The “rural” cemetery movement, which appealed to a public desire for healthier as well as morally instructive pastoral settings, was the result.

As the rituals and treatment of the dead expanded to meet the varied needs of antebellum northerners, so did the meaning of the corpse itself. On the one hand, significant numbers of antebellum northerners embraced a “cult of memory” that domesticated and beautified the corpse and interpreted the dead body in the light of the nuclear family or in terms of the soul’s spiritual journey. A market for portraits of the dead boomed in the period from 1830 to 1860, although photography soon replaced painting as the favored method of memorializing the deceased. At the same time, antebellum northerners displayed a profound horror of and fascination with bodily putrefaction. Viewing the body as it decayed—sometimes over a period of months or years—was an integral component to the disposal of the dead in the antebellum period, and the image of bodily deterioration was a central theme in antebellum painting and writing.

The Romantic view of dying and death that took hold in northern Protestant culture was paralleled by a growing determination among scientists and medical professionals to assert that death was a scientific fact of no supernatural significance; the decay of the dead body should not be seen as a sign of God’s punishment of humanity, but rather as a simple and unthreatening natural process. The prejudice against the scientific view of the corpse continued to be strong through the antebellum period, however, as evidenced by the fact that medical schools were criticized and even attacked for obtaining cadavers for dissection and study.

The carnage and widespread death resulting during the Civil War forced many antebellum northerners to reevaluate their priorities and responsibilities to the dead. The vast numbers of corpses forced survivors to bury their dead comrades near where they fell, either in individual graves or in mass trenches, and without ceremony. Distance also prohibited most northern families from retrieving their fallen sons and fathers for proper burial. The evident desire of many families for the return of the bodies of their dead relatives led enterprising undertakers to offer a variety of methods for preserving bodies for transportation, including embalming, a practice which had previously been popularly shunned and almost exclusively used by doctors preparing cadavers for study and dissection. The result was a radical transformation in how northerners viewed the practice of preserving the dead. “In the span of roughly five years,” notes Laderman, embalming was transformed from a practice “almost exclusive to the emerging professional medical field—peripheral to the public arena and resisted by northern Protestants—to an accepted, highly visible, and desired treatment for the dead” (p. 153).

The overwhelming number of bodies also led to a decline in the Romantic view of death and a corresponding growth in public indifference to the spectacle of the corpse. New, more realistic verbal and visual portraits of dying and death began to appear in newspaper and magazine stories and in photographs of war scenes. As Laderman argues, the sheer numbers of dead eradicated the sense that the corpse was to be revered. There was no room left for communal responsibility, religious solemnity, or individual respect when dealing with dead bodies.

As it became easier and easier to objectify the corpse, its domestic and religious connotations lessened in significance and were replaced by new, politicized meanings. In the North, the tragedy of the Civil War was interpreted either as a sign of past national sin, corruption, and punishment, or as a source of national regeneration and redemption. The acceptance of death on such a massive scale as an event of national significance was counterbalanced with romanticized stories of individual bravery and heroism in the face of death, however. Both developments served the interests of the Union in the pursuit of its war aims. As Laderman notes, “severing the body from any spiritual and symbolic association allowed the machine of war to operate more smoothly and efficiently” (p. 137).

In the final chapter of The Sacred Remains, Laderman briefly outlines the factors that contributed to the full emergence of a professional death industry by the 1880s. Even though the book’s title suggests that Laderman’s discussion extends substantively into the 1880s, Laderman really only provides us with an outline of the social and economic conditions that allowed entrepreneurs to complete the process of objectification and commodification of the corpse that had begun in the antebellum period.

Laderman has presented a richly nuanced and insightful discussion of the practices surrounding dying
and death in the antebellum North. His decision to frame his study with vignettes of the deaths and funerals of three significant public figures in nineteenth-century America (George Washington, John Brown, and Abraham Lincoln) makes his point about the growth of the significance of the corpse in a striking way. The many public funerals marking Washington’s death in 1799 culminated with processions containing empty coffins that held the symbolic body of the first president, while Lincoln’s funeral procession across the North in 1865 allowed thousands of Americans to gaze upon his embalmed body. Laderman has also done a particularly fine job in delineating the multiplicity of religious meanings death and the dead body held for northern Protestants in the antebellum decades and his discussion about how those meanings were disrupted and replaced by a new, politicized set during the Civil War is convincing and well argued.

I feel, however, that Laderman doesn’t grant enough space to exploring the medical and scientific perspectives on death in the antebellum decades. For example, the chief point of conflict between those who embraced the scientific view of the corpse and the more prevalent religious views seems to have been over the issue of grave robbing. Laderman states that many antebellum northerners found the idea of dissecting the human body so distasteful they occasionally rioted against medical establishments over the theft of bodies. Is there more going on here than this? I suspect that the scientific view of death and corpses is at least as complex as the varied religious perspectives Laderman so fully elaborates.

Laderman also devotes only a few pages to the sensationalistic view of corpses evident in antebellum culture. He does discuss George Lippard’s The Quaker City (1845), a best-selling critique of American society that depicted the city as a rotting, decomposing corpse, and he also mentions the antebellum enthusiasm for sensational literature—murder pamphlets, trial reports, execution pamphlets, and penny newspapers that focused on death, violence, and sexuality—but his entire discussion is limited to a few pages. I think Laderman is missing an important strand in the antebellum understanding of dying and death by minimizing the importance of sensational literature and other forms of disreputable discourse on dead and dying bodies.

Finally, I think Laderman could have devoted more attention to the treatment of the dishonored dead. Throughout the book Laderman’s primary focus is on the deaths and corpses of individuals who were valued—loved ones, respected leaders, soldiers for the cause. Yet how a society treats the dishonored dying and dead is as significant—perhaps even more significant—as how it treats the honored dead. To his credit, Laderman does start the book with a discussion of the different treatment granted to the honorable and dishonorable dead when he compares the funerals of George Washington in 1799 with the burial of a suicide. He also returns to this point again when he mentions the problem of how the corpses of the urban poor were to be disposed, and even later when he briefly discusses the Union methods for the disposal of Confederate corpses. But the only point where Laderman does do justice to the issue is in his discussion of Northern fears about how the bodies of fallen Union soldiers might be desecrated by Confederates. One place where Laderman might have found a great deal of material to work with is with the execution and treatment of condemned criminals. A number of questions come to mind: How does the fact that public executions were halted in the antebellum decades relate to the rise of “morbid obsessions” such as viewing the dead? Were prison graveyards distinctive in any way? What happened to the bodies of executed criminals? and so on.

Of course, only bad books leave the reader with no questions, and The Sacred Remains is very much the opposite. It is a persuasive and highly readable discussion of how northern Protestants managed death from the early nineteenth century through the Civil War. An excellent book on an important topic, it marks a new high point in the study of death in American history.

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