In this succinct and clearly written volume, Guy R. Hasegawa examines how the United States and Confederate governments procured and distributed artificial limbs to wounded military personnel during the American Civil War. A trained pharmacist and director emeritus of the Society of Civil War Historians, Hasegawa illustrates how the human destruction of the Civil War motivated well-meaning people to explore new ways to mitigate the suffering of amputees while the war was still raging. He also argues that the effectiveness of these endeavors highlights "the vast differences between the Union and Confederacy in industrial capacity and economic conditions" through a comparative examination of artificial limb programs in the North and South (p. xii).

Shocked by the number of men maimed during combat, Americans on both sides sought to provide some kind of relief to amputees. What this relief would look like remained to be answered, and Hasegawa does a wonderful job describing the factors that shaped ensuing efforts to address this need under wartime conditions. The US Congress initially appropriated fifteen thousand dollars towards providing servicemen with prosthetics in July 1862; however, this number would skyrocket after the Battle of Sharpsburg two months later. A national effort to provide limbs did not commence in the seceding states until January 1864, when private activists founded the Association for the Relief of Maimed Soldiers (ARMS) and lobbied for the support of individuals within the Confederate military.

Hasegawa argues that the Union effort to build a national artificial limb program was successful because it enjoyed several advantages not found in the Confederacy. First, the program enjoyed relatively consistent bureaucratic leadership from the US Army, as well as increasing financial support from Congress. Second, the North was also home to the burgeoning and intensely competitive American prosthetic limb industry. By pitting experienced manufacturers like B. Frank Palmer and Douglas Bly against one another, the US government compelled potential contractors to offer high-quality goods and services at low costs. Hoping to become the sole purveyor of artificial limbs to Union amputees, some manufacturers even sold their wares to the government at a loss.

Meanwhile, a lack of skilled manufactures, industrial material, labor, and support from the Confederate government stymied ARMS’s efforts in the South. The few artificial limb manufacturers that existed in the South struggled to protect their skilled workers from conscription. ARMS also relied heavily on private donations, which collapsed as Richmond became more isolated from the rest of the Confederacy. While the lack of paint, rubber, and brass did not prevent contractors from producing limbs, it did contribute to the fact that Southern prosthetics were of noticeably lower quality than those imported from the North and Europe. Despite the Confederate army’s consistent support, "the good intentions and sacrifices that sustained ARMS could not overcome a wartime environment that was anything but conducive to the association’s success" (p. 69).

Mending Broken Soldiers is a valuable contribution to the history of medicine and disability during the Civil War.

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Hasegawa focuses primarily on wartime efforts to provide limbs to wounded soldiers, but his research complements the studies of postwar disability and welfare programs for veterans by Brian Matthew Jordan, Megan Kate Nelson, James Marten, and Brian Craig Miller.[1] Like these authors, Hasegawa argues that advocates of artificial limb programs believed that prosthetics could heal the shattered masculinity of wounded soldiers. Manufacturers like Palmer and Bly lauded the restorative quality of their products, offering amputees images of men knocking down horses with their new arms or briskly chopping wood upon manufactured feet and patented rubber heels. Hasegawa aptly points out that veterans quickly realized the limits of these promises, since most veterans opted for cash payments in lieu of often imperfect and uncomfortable government limbs.

While more recent histories of disability during the Civil War era have focused on the experiences of wounded veterans and the cultural discourses regarding masculinity, dependency, and state obligation that surrounded them, Hasegawa offers a unique view of the artificial limbs industry. Prior to the Civil War, manufacturers of wooden legs and mechanical arms existed somewhere between an emerging medical profession and traditional trade craft. Palmer called himself a “surgeon artist” in order to convey his skill as a craftsman and his knowledge of human anatomy. Constantly warding off accusations of quackery from other physicians, he also began using “Dr.” before his name in advertisements—despite the fact that his honorary degree was in law. Industrial subterfuge was common in this small world of limb manufacturers. Apprentices regularly absconded with the secrets they learned from their masters and started rival businesses. For example, Benjamin W. Jewett allegedly stole his design for a leg from his former boss, B. Frank Palmer, who in turn was accused of lifting his design from his former master, William Selpho.

By the time the Civil War started, this small world of limbs manufacturers, shaped by years of “mechanical ingenuity, bitter rivalry, and shrewd business positioning,” was poised to meet the increased demand for their products (p. 7). In order to start an artificial limb sector in the Confederacy, secretary of ARMS William Allen Carrington urged Southern mechanics, locksmiths, and blacksmiths to reverse-engineer captured prosthetics from the North. Competition remained fierce after the war, as these companies attempted to secure contract monopolies and engage high-ranking amputees like Richard E. Ewell and John Bell Hood as celebrity spokesmen. Hasegawa’s expertise in the medical profession, as well as his ability to piece together an array of scattered primary source material, expands historians’ understanding not only of physical disability during the Civil War, but of the industry that sought to heal them.

Readers may also find that this concise book has left a few historical questions for future scholars to explore. For example, Hasegawa admits that he has not located all the primary source material pertaining to Civil War artificial limb programs—a fact that invites future inquiry. It is also interesting to note that the movement to provide artificial limbs to rebel soldiers began in the African Church in Richmond, Virginia, and that Nathan Bedford Forrest became an honorary director of ARMS when “the negroes of the Methodist congregation at Uniontown, Alabama” made a donation in his name (p. 62). These strange historical ironies seem to reflect the complexity of race in the South during the Civil War and should inspire further examination. Overall, this is an excellent book and should be assigned to undergraduate or graduate students interested in the history of disability or medicine during the nineteenth century.

Note


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