

War Stories: Suffering and Sacrifice in the Civil War North

Court Carney

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Review

Carney, Court

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Clarke, Frances M. *War Stories: Suffering and Sacrifice in the Civil War North*. The University of Chicago Press, \$35.00 ISBN 978-0-226-10862-9

Fresh Analysis Considers Civil War's Horror

Scattered throughout Civil War archives, composed deathbed scenes swaddled in melodrama and pathos have elicited more than a few critical eye rolls from researchers. Did the entire hospital really join together in song? Is the chaplain's account trustworthy? And ultimately: Did they really believe this? The omnipresence of these accounts as well as the constant refrain of clichés can make it difficult for the modern researcher to delve directly into what these stories ultimately say about life for Americans in the 1860s. In *War Stories*, Frances Clarke, a scholar of 19th American history with a particular focus on the culture of race and gender, sets out to discover the meaning behind the sentimentality. With a focus on the letters, diaries, and songs of pro-Union northerners, Clarke seeks to understand these tableaux within the context of Victorian culture and its hold on the American imagination throughout this period. These formulaic tales, told and retold, serve as the starting point for a rich study of pain, suffering, and (within a decidedly American Victorian context) the very real scars of life and death.

A Senior Lecturer at the University of Sydney, Clarke has written extensively on the culture and memory of the Civil War Era and this breadth of scholarship serves her well as she navigates a wide range of sources in constructing her argument. Her major point is that Americans believed in "didactic stories of suffering" because they thought of emotional persuasion in positive ways. The lack of emotional manipulation on a large scale, she argues, meant that they maintained a belief in genuine emotions. To that end, her first chapter serves an extended warning to contextualize everything and to suspend skepticism—to think more carefully and consciously about the influence of the present on the study of the past. Throughout *War Stories*, Clarke traces the

concept of pain through reform literature, philosophy, and abolitionism to illustrate both the meaning of suffering as well as the multiple ways in which northerners during this period experienced (and inflicted) pain.

Clarke uses the multifaceted story of Henry Bowditch, a second lieutenant from Massachusetts, to personalize her narrative. Bowditch's death, and really his family's quest to ensure that his death was inspirational, allows Clarke to detail the tortuous path these tales can take. There is the story of Bowditch's death, of course, then the remembered story of his death, the various meanings of his death, the retelling of his death, the subsequent redefining of the meaning of his death, and ultimately the historicizing of his death. Not to mention his family's basic struggle to comprehend whether or not he died a heroic martyr. One of the strongest parts of her study, the Bowditch material strikes at the heart of what death represented to northerners during the Civil War. Other parts of her book are less consistent—and the concept of race is generally left in the margins. Still, Clarke is on stronger footing with gender and her discussion of the shifting definitions of home/domesticity goes a long way to detail the complicated ways in which women struggled to create family cohesion, keep their husbands from devolving into violent amorality, and hopefully save the republic from collapse. Overall, Clarke presents a complex tale of lives defined through suffering and the hope that any death would serve a higher purpose, and if some of her argument veers towards the known, there is still an artfulness and verve to her writing that breathes new life into the material.

Despite its concise focus on the Civil War North, Clarke's book intriguingly hints at several larger themes that extend just beyond her narrative. Coursing through the entire book is a larger story of authenticity and the impending demolition of this emotional naivety via modernity. Though Clarke, to her organizational credit, consistently keeps her focus squarely on the Civil War Era, these themes provide an intellectual heft to her study. The richest sections of the book—the discussion of Bowditch, for example, and the chapter on amputees and the penmanship competition for “the Left-Armed”—are inventive, nuanced, analytical, and thoughtful. As people broken by war sought to take control of their lives and destinies they had to battle the physical and emotional costs of war, and as Clarke posits, this struggle formed national scars that would define generations to come.

Court Carney received his Ph.D. in history from Louisiana State University in 2003. He has written extensively on Nathan Bedford Forrest and Civil War

memory. In addition, the University Press of Kansas published his book on the origins of jazz—Cuttin' Up: How Early Jazz Got America's Ear—in 2009.