

Life and Limb: Perspectives on the American Civil War

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Review

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Collecting the Voices of the Living and the Dead

In the summer of 1862, Katherine Prescott Wormeley, while working as a nurse, wrote a letter to her mother, in which she believed that no one could understand the contours of war “until they see this black side of it.” Yet, in the last decade, historians and popular culture have worked feverishly to explore the darker elements of the American Civil War. Movie-goers watched a hospital worker deliver a wheelbarrow full of amputated limbs in Stephen Spielberg’s award-winning *Lincoln*(2012). Television viewers spent an hour a week inside *Mercy Street*, a northern Virginia hospital filled with blood, bawling, lust, lacerations, and the grotesque nature of both medicine and shoddy dialogue. Historians have produced several volumes (with several more on the way) that tackle disease, death, amputation, suicide, abuse, and trauma both inside and outside of the hospital ward. Thus, it is the perfect time for an edited collection of voices from the Civil War that explore the darker crevices and that defined the very nature of nineteenth century warfare.

Life and Limb presents a series of editorial missteps that hinder what could have been a very special collection of voices from the Civil War era. David Seed’s introduction to the volume only mentions a “drama” that “regularly falls on the interplay between voices, between patient and nurse, observer and participant (1).” The introduction does not give the reader a sense of why these particular voices appear in the volume, nor does it lay out how all of this fits within the recent dark turn in Civil War studies. Thus, the primary sources are grouped together by a topical approach. The first brief section offers two accounts of surgical memoirs before jumping to several accounts on nursing. After an exploration of medical facilities and pathology, the volume shifts to

photography, amputations and prosthetic limbs, and battlefield trauma. The volume then concludes with a section called post-war narratives.

The documents, which are at the heart of the volume, overwhelmingly tilt toward the Union perspective. The voices of the southern experience with death and medical destruction only appear in a few instances (and then they are rather brief excerpts). At the same time, African American experiences account for three documents. There are no accounts of the major southern hospitals, like Chimborazo. Instead, the editors offer two paragraphs from Mary Chesnut's view of the St. Charles hospital in Richmond. All of the nursing accounts are those of Union nurses (which is shocking, considering the availability of material here, especially the compelling narrative of Phoebe Pember). The post-war narrative section is mostly the literature of Ambrose Bierce and Stephen Crane and offers no Confederate perspective at all, despite a wealth of Memorial Day speeches, publications, and memoirs that tackle the stiff headwinds facing southern society. Furthermore, the documents only contain a brief biographical introduction, and do not offer any citations or notes throughout the text to provide the reader with additional background information or context.

Several articles, written by historians, artists, and literature experts, are sprinkled throughout the volume in order to add a bit more depth and context to the primary sources. However, most of the articles fail to either grapple with the larger context of the subject matter or seriously engage the historical scholarship. Robert Leigh Davis' biographical exploration of Walt Whitman contains no footnotes and does not place Whitman within the larger realm of biographical explorations of the famous poet (especially the superb cultural biography written by David Reynolds). Dillon Jackson Carroll's thoughtful exploration of amputee Napoleon Perkins touches on the ideas of manhood but neither defines the contours of masculinity in the United States nor showcases the vast body of scholarship pertaining to notions of honor and manhood on both sides of the geographic divide. Stephen Kenny's concluding essay, entitled *The Aftermath*, provides a brief overview of some recent scholarship on medicine and death, but fails to account for the growing body of cultural studies on death (the work of Mark Schantz, John Neff, J. David Hacker, and Nicholas Marshall) or the environmental destruction of the body through military damage and disease (as seen in the work of Megan Kate Nelson, Katherine Shively Meier, and others). Part of this failure to think about the larger picture and the historiography should rest at the feet of the editors or the press, who clearly missed an opportunity to craft an important collection of documents by simply adding a paragraph or

footnote here and there.

Life and Limb may best be suited for usage in the college classroom. Students in a nineteenth century literature course or a history of either medicine or the United States during the Civil War could certainly peruse the documents for a paper that explored the darker aspects of warfare. Otherwise, the volume presents a missed opportunity for an excellent collection that would have highlighted the roles of medicine and death in shaping the American culture in the midst of a conflict accented by the agony of victory and defeat.

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