

Midnight In America: Darkness, Sleep, And Dreams During The Civil War

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Review

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The Comforts of Sleep and Bonds of Intimacy

Think of a Civil War battlefield and visions of blood, smoke, fire, mutilation, and the cries of the wounded and the dying come to mind. George W. Peck, an infantryman from Wisconsin, surely witnessed his share of those horrors. But when he fell asleep one night he “dreamed that all of the bullets used in the war were made of India rubber ‘and war was just fun.’ ‘There was no more blood,’” Peck later recounted. “‘There was no one killed, no legs shot off, and men on each side, when not fighting with harmless missiles, were gathered together, blue and gray, having a regular picnic, and every evening there was a dance, the rebels furnishing the girls.’” (p. 49) Peck’s nighttime fantasy is one of many shared in Jonathan White’s analysis of over 400 dreams of Civil War America. Eschewing any psychological analysis beyond the symbolic meanings ascribed by the dreamers themselves, White nonetheless suggests that dreams helped soldiers and civilians alike to cope with the trauma of war.

As in most wars, a great gulf divided Civil War combatants from the civilian world of the home front. The monotony and discomfort of camp life, the exhaustion of long marches, and the fear and exhilaration of the battlefield distanced soldiers from their former lives and from their loved ones back home. Sleep brought dreams that bridged that gap, especially because so many Americans were willing to share them in their letters. Sleep itself became a touchstone connecting men to their wives. Soldiers penned details in their letters of sleeping stretched out on the hard ground or crowded with bedmates in flimsy tents while their wives replied with reminders of the comforts and pleasures that awaited them in cozier beds. The contrast could be demoralizing but at the same time, the mundane familiarity of bedtime anchored many letters to and from the battlefield. When those soldiers did succumb to exhausted slumber, they often

dreamed of home and homecomings. Anxieties intruded, of course, especially of infidelity and death, and correspondents were remarkably willing to share their fears, even women who faced social pressure to maintain a positive outlook to boost morale. Dollie Vermillion of Iowa described her sense of desolation to her husband and confessed some guilt over that admission of feelings. “Sometimes I am patriotic, and I feel that it would be a glorious thing to live, or die, in defense of a country so just and holy. But my heart is truer than my head.” (60) News of battles sometimes triggered northern women’s dreams of being transported to the front, while southern women were more likely to dream about the war intruding on their lives. Sarah Morgan dreamt of watching the bombardment of her Louisiana home while standing in blood up to her knees, while a Kentucky woman dreamt of black and white soldiers sharing rations and marching off to battle alongside one another.

White argues that those shared bedtime routines and dreams, both happy and distressing, knit together bonds of emotional intimacy that helped soldiers and civilians transcend wartime trauma. He also suggests that the willingness to share dreams with loved ones reflected the persistence of a sentimental culture that celebrated domesticity. Indeed, soldiers’ dreams of home became a popular culture motif, popping up in poems, songs, and prints during and long after the Civil War.

African Americans, at least those who wrote about their escapes from slavery, did not have reassuring dreams of homecomings. Instead, men like Solomon Northrup and Charles Ball suffered nightmares about the families they had left behind, suggesting that even sleep did not bring respite from the traumas of enslavement. White’s chapter on African-American dreams moves beyond the Civil War to cover the antebellum period as well. He emphasizes commonalities and divisions in the “dream culture” of whites and blacks. (95) Many of the folk beliefs about the meanings of dreams had both African and European roots. Southern whites and blacks often interpreted dreams as mirror images by assigning opposite meanings to objects and events. A vision of a hearse, for example, signaled an upcoming wedding. However, White also argues that prophetic dreams retained a central place in African-American religion while white evangelicals by the mid-nineteenth century increasingly scoffed at such superstitions. On page 84, White notes that while “dreams and visions had been an important part of white and black religious experiences during the antebellum period, they were diminishing in white Christian practices by the time of the Civil War.” By the end of the chapter, on pages 99-100, he seems to retreat a bit

from that argument. “This is not to say that white Christians outright rejected that dreams could carry spiritual meaning—far from it,” White writes. Instead they “more often shared their dreams with one another quietly, in letters and publications, or over the breakfast table, not in public places of worship,” while African Americans brought dreams to “their public rituals and professions of faith.”

That question of whether or not white Americans had retreated from a supernatural interpretation of dreams is central to White’s chapter on dreams about dying. Soldiers often recounted nighttime visions of their own deaths in their letters and in conversations with their comrades. When those dreams proved true, they found their way into postwar memoirs and regimental histories. White argues on pages 103 and 104 that “a form of supernatural or providential thinking about dreams and premonitions persisted among many Civil War veterans” and helped survivors “find inspiration and hope in suffering and death.” The most famous dreams of death, of course, belonged to Abraham Lincoln. In a fascinating final chapter, White carefully analyzes the ways in which accounts of those dreams spread after his assassination and shifted in tone and interpretation before concluding that they were false.

Midnight in America ranges through many topics and is a wonderful addition to the voluminous literature on the Civil War. White has done prodigious research in gathering up the myriad accounts of dreams and has presented them in an interpretive framework that illuminates larger meanings about the persistence of sentimentality and spiritualism. Forgoing psychological interpretation, he lets the dreams, and the dreamers, speak for themselves. In doing so, White offers us a glimpse into an intimate world that existed beneath the surface of the Civil War.

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