

# The Civil War Dead and American Modernity

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## Review

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**Finseth, Ian.** *The Civil War Dead and American Modernity*. Oxford University Press, \$65.00 ISBN 9780190848347

"We Shall Meet, But We Shall Miss Him: *The Civil War Dead and American Modernity*"

Author Ian Finseth, in *The Civil War Dead and American Modernity*, has mined the graveyards, remains, and memento mori of the Civil War to offer a reinterpretation of their cultural importance to the evolution of American modernization. His thesis is that the Civil War dead became one of the most powerful symbols of the relationship of the present to the past. Finseth is an Associate Professor of American Literature at the University of North Texas, and this book is one of the volumes in the Oxford Studies in American Literary History.

Using a massive amount of documentation—historical, visual, and literary—Finseth questions how melancholy memories of the past came to inform the postwar technology, business, intellectual, and transportation booms that defined the Gilded Age. As Victorian America fragmented after 1865, our national self-identity was rebuilt on two very different foundations. In the North, soldiers returned to a stable, often booming, economy. They came home winners, and most had jobs and intact families. The war had not been fought, except for a few exceptions, on northern soil and the wartime economy had invigorated urban areas. In the South, nothing like this happened. Their economy was in ruins, their home places were often completely abandoned or destroyed, and the stigma of losing the war hung heavily, if never publically acknowledged, over their heads. Social consensus of America's new place in the world was impossible to construct with this disparity of postwar experience.

In remembering and honoring the Civil War dead, both parts of America were provided with an illusion of identification and continuity with the past. Exactly how this affected the nation is subject to much discussion, and Finseth's book certainly provides

this. One example that is particularly notable is a surprising discussion of the impact of Mathew Brady's New York photographic exhibit, "The Dead of Antietam." Historiographically we are led to believe that this exhibit shocked New York gallery patrons. "Mr. Brady has done something to bring home to us the terrible reality and earnestness of war," wrote the *New York Times* after the original exhibition began in October 1862. "If he has not brought bodies and laid them in our dooryards and along the streets, he has done something very like it." Finseth takes this assumption of effect apart bit by bit, mentioning no obvious change in the behavior of New Yorkers, nor much mention of the exhibition in letters. There is no record that any patrons cried out or fainted upon seeing the images. Perhaps the dead were just dead. The author certainly raises some interesting questions.

If any criticism of *The Civil War Dead and American Modernity* should be offered, it would be that this book is not written for a reader at an entry level of Civil War or 19th century history. Finseth uses many academic references in art, literature, philosophy and political thought, and he is loath to use a simple sentence when a compound-complex one will do. This is not a book meant for a casual summer read. At \$65.00 a copy, I would only recommend it for a serious student of the evolution of 19th century sociology. Although the title implies that it is a "Civil War book," it really goes into a much deeper examination of the structure of postwar American society than it does the war itself. If, however, that sort of thing is your passion, then Finseth's volume is certainly worth the price.

*Meg Groeling received her Master's degree in Military History, with a Civil War emphasis, in 2016, from American Public University. Savas Beatie published her first book, The Aftermath of Battle: The Burial of the Civil War Dead, in the fall of 2015, and she has written First Fallen: The Life of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, which Southern Illinois University Press has contracted for publication sometime within the next two years. She is a regular contributor to the blog Emerging Civil War and reviews a lot of books.*