

### Spectacle of Grief: Public Funerals and Memory in the Civil War Era

Meg Groeling  
bloodnight@aol.com

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## Review

Groeling, Meg

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**Purcell, Sarah J.** *Spectacle of Grief: Public Funerals and Memory in the Civil War Era*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2022. EBOOK. \$26.99 ISBN 9781469668345 pp. 352

### **The Political Influence of Public Mourning**

*Spectacle of Grief: Public Funerals and Memory in the Civil War Era*, by Sarah J. Purcell, is an examination of public funerals conducted for the major players in the Civil War era. These “spectacles” defined public mourning in a time when mourning was an industry in almost every sense. Rules and customs regulated the behavior of everyone from immediate family to the general public standing along a railroad track to honor the dead. From oration and song to public burials, the deaths of Henry Clay, Elmer Ellsworth, “Stonewall” Jackson, Robert E. Lee, Charles Sumner, and Joseph E. Johnston are examined and compared.

Henry Clay died on June 29, 1852, of tuberculosis. His remains were the first to lie in state at the Capitol Rotunda, but this was by no means his only funeral. His public funerals, patriotic and nationalistic, took place on a scale never seen before. Clay’s remains traveled throughout much of the nation and served as a part of the crisis of 1850, to which the public responded with great anxiety. Would Clay's passing remove the last roadblock holding back disunion? Was it the end of compromise? On their way to another town or city, these national questions remained long after the casket and flags had disappeared. Wondering what came next, millions of Americans participated in some form of mourning for Henry Clay.

In late May 1861, the second death to rock the country (at least the North) was that of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth. Ellsworth was a nationally known militia figure. When Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteer troops, Ellsworth went to New York and returned a few days later with a regiment of New York firefighters. They became known as the Fire Zouaves. On the night of May 23-24, his men were one of the first regiments to land in Alexandria under martial law after Virginia citizens ratified secession. Early on the 24th, Colonel Ellsworth and a few soldiers entered the Marshall House hotel and removed a Confederate flag from its roof. Ellsworth was

killed as he descended the stairs inside the hotel, and one of his men immediately killed James Jackson, the Virginian who had shot Ellsworth. This death was the first officer death of the war. For the North, Ellsworth's funeral was like Clay's. Ellsworth's remains lay in state in the East Room of the Presidential Mansion and then traveled by train and steamboat to New York City and Mechanicville, New York, where he was interred.

The grand public funerals given him made Ellsworth the North's first martyr and “shored up Union support in the first months of the Civil War” (47). Although James Jackson, Ellsworth's murderer, got some attention when he was buried, it was short shrift compared to Ellsworth. The southern version of intense mourning can be seen in the obsequies for General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson. Killed by friendly fire at Chancellorsville, the Confederacy was convulsed by grief. Jackson was seen as a martyr for the southern cause. Author Sarah Purcell explains the importance of Jackson's funeral: “Jackson's funeral concentrated Confederate sorrow for personal losses, demonstrated both fear and resolve for the future of the war, and inaugurated the links between Confederate nationalism and the nascent Lost Cause ideology” (73).

After the war, Lincoln's funeral and those of Robert E. Lee, Charles Sumner, Joseph E. Johnston, Frederick Douglass, and Winnie Davis are described and analyzed. These funerals gave the public another opportunity to regard the Civil War critically. Confederate funerals reinforced the Lost Cause and created many opportunities for groups like the Daughters of the Confederacy to glorify their dead without the uncomfortable facts of slavery. They also gave the South an excuse to “forget” that they had lost the war. Conversely, northern funerals honored statesmen and reminded citizens that the war was nobly fought and nobly won.

Today politicians, judges, and citizens still honor the Capitol Rotunda with their remains and their memory. The evening news reports who attends the funeral and who is excluded. Public funerals like that held for Congressman John Lewis continue to demand the attention of Americans and cause us all to examine what the nation should stand for. Lewis's funerals helped amplify “the renewed calls for civil rights,” especially after the May 25, 2020, killing of George Floyd (221-222).

As public mourning customs change, especially the conflict concerning Confederate symbolism, the landscape of the country has changed. Statues have been removed and repurposed. Nevertheless, public funerals still communicate messages about politics and national

identity, even as the Civil War continues to haunt us. Not a week goes by that the war or someone in it is not referenced in the current news cycle. *Spectacle of Grief: Public Funerals and Memory in the Civil War Era*, by Sarah J. Purcell, the L. F. Parker Professor of History at Grinnell College, helps readers navigate the sometimes-treacherous waters of our own era.

*Meg Groeling earned 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 Savas Beatie also publishes. In addition, she is a regular contributor to the blog Emerging Civil War. She and her husband live with three cats in a 1927 California bungalow covered with roses on the outside and books inside.*