

Empty Sleeves: Amputation in the Civil War South

Steven Noll

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Review

Noll, Steven

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Miller, Brian Craig *Empty Sleeves: Amputation in the Civil War South*.
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Disability and Masculinity in the Postwar South

Empty Sleeves mixes new Civil War history, gender and masculinity studies, and disability history to examine the experiences of southern soldiers who lost limbs in the horrific conflict that was the American Civil War. It also analyzes the responses to and treatment of these Confederate soldiers by doctors, family members (especially female ones) and governmental entities both during and after the war. In doing so, author Brian Miller ties the idea of broken bodies to the notion of a broken South, as he uses the "empty sleeve" as a metaphor for a region forced to come to grips with the end of slavery and the possible demise of white supremacy. Through the book, Miller provides insight into both the plight of disabled soldiers and the broader meaning of their disability to the history of the Civil War.

Thousands of soldiers, Union and Confederate, black and white, lost limbs in the carnage of the Civil War. According to Miller, when traditional histories and popular culture mention this fact (if they do at all), they tend to emphasize either the "shock and awe" factor or how incompetent and bloodthirsty surgeons acted as butchers by unnecessarily amputating limbs, often exacerbating injuries and even causing death. Miller moves past that to look at the soldiers themselves and the suffering they endured. He cannot answer however the first question many have about amputations on the Confederate side- how many were there? Poor and often erroneous documentation lead Miller to rightfully conclude that, "no concrete figures are available as to how many Confederate amputees existed and survived the war" (10). But Miller is not really interested in composite numbers. He is much more concerned with the plight of the individual amputee and his response to his catastrophic injury. To recount that story, he has done a remarkable job of combing archives and manuscript sources to tease out these

stories and given them broader meaning. He breaks down this study into five chapters that examine both the reaction to and the reaction of Confederate soldiers to losing a limb, or in some cases more than one limb. Chapter one analyzes the doctors who performed the surgeries on the injured soldiers. The second chapter looks at the responses of the soldiers themselves to their often catastrophic injuries and how they coped with them. Chapters three and four examine how women responded to husbands, sons, and neighbors who returned from the war with bodies considered less than "normal" and how disabled soldiers fit back into Southern society after the war was over. Finally, chapter five deals with the responses of southern states (both during and after the war) to the issues of dependency and payment associated with amputees and their ability to integrate successfully back into society.

All five chapters however, are tied together by the themes of masculinity, patriarchy, and honor. Miller sees Southern white males (especially elites ones) obsessed with notions of independence and providing for those considered in need of need- women, children, and slaves. This changed dramatically for those soldiers who returned home with missing limbs and therefore often had to become dependent on others for help with even basic chores of daily living. This feeling of failure, of turning from independent patriarch to dependent subject, was made even worse by the concomitant disaster of the South itself losing the war. Miller concludes that "while northern amputees had the benefit of associating their missing limbs with victory, limbless southerners became a highly visible reminder of all kinds of loss, as the empty sleeve marked failure for all to see" (120). Southerners vacillated in their interpretation of their wounded veterans. On the one hand, they were viewed as symbols of Southern valor and patriotism, as exemplified by the cult surrounding Stonewall Jackson's amputated arm. On the other, they were perceived as visible symbols of the South's defeat. These generalized beliefs filtered down to the individual disabled soldier, who had to cope with not only his loss of limb but the issues connected with the South's defeat as well. Yet, by the 1890s, as that defeat became associated with both Jim Crow and the mythology of the Lost Cause, Miller concludes that "southern society evolved to recognize the empty sleeve as a symbol of sacrifice, rather than defeat" (140).

Miller starts the book by overturning the commonly held belief that Civil War surgeons were incompetent butchers whose bloody practices of amputating as the first resort, rather than the last, killed more soldiers than they saved. Using a variety of source material from archives all over the South, he concludes that

doctors actually were more skilled than previously thought and amputated rather cautiously. He also maintains that surgical procedures improved dramatically as the war progressed, stating ruefully that “they [surgeons] learned so much [about how to improve their surgical techniques] because the war gave them so much practice” (49). He ends by examining how governmental organizations in the South, especially at the state level, dealt with veterans and their attendant disability issues. In a region devastated by four years of war, states had to decide whether to provide limited financial and medical resources to former soldiers with serious disabilities. Those amputees also had to make a decision as well: whether to accept such aid and risk become dependent on the state (with all the attendant psychological baggage such a status entailed) or to remain independent and risk a slide into penury and destitution. Both states and former soldiers handled these delicate situations in various ways. Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Virginia all constructed immediate postwar program that provided both financial support and prosthetic devices for amputees, attempting to insure however, that these recipients did not become fully dependent on the state. In the process, Miller debunks the now-commonly held idea that Mississippi spent over 20% of its immediate postwar state budget on the purchase of artificial limbs for disabled veterans. His figures indicate that Mississippi only allocated approximately \$26,000 for prosthetic devices from 1866-1870 in a total budget of \$2.3 million. On the other hand, Arkansas waited until 1893 to provide any support at all for amputees. It took until 1913 and a state court ruling for Kentucky (although not a Confederate state but one with a number of Confederate veterans who lost limbs) to give such funding.

Empty Sleeves provides a long needed addition to the massive literature on the Civil War. Well-written and voluminously researched, the book ties together ideas about the Lost Cause and disability that provide a very provocative lens for examining not only the Civil War itself, but especially the periods of Reconstruction and Redemption that followed it. In an otherwise very positive review, I have two points of concern. First, Miller too often simply gives example after example of soldiers and doctors discussing the issues surrounding amputation. Some judicious editing would have made that less tedious and repetitious. Secondly, the book’s subtitle read “Amputation in the Civil War South.” Certainly there were black Southerners who underwent amputation as a result of their war injuries. I would love to have heard their stories, especially as tied to the ideas of masculinity and dependency. That may be, however, the basis for another book. In a note of full disclosure, reviewing this book was more than

simply an academic exercise for me. My father was a World War II veteran, who had his leg amputated after being wounded on Saipan in 1944. I grew up with many of the issues and concerns raised by Brian Miller in this book. Certainly, there are many differences between the experiences of World War II amputees and those of Confederate soldiers in the Civil War. Yet, as with Miller's epilogue, when he discusses the plight of contemporary amputees from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, there are also many similarities. In examining those similarities and the themes associated with disability, this book provides a major step towards incorporating the stories of these wounded soldiers into the larger themes of Civil War history, and by extension, American history as a whole.

Steven Noll is a master lecturer in the department of history at the University of Florida. He is currently working on a book about the 1977 disability rights protests.