

Awaiting the Heavenly Country: the Civil War and America's Culture of Death

Robert C. Kenzer

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Kenzer, Robert C. (2008) "Awaiting the Heavenly Country: the Civil War and America's Culture of Death," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.10.4.11

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol10/iss4/11>

Review

Kenzer, Robert C.

Fall 2008

Schantz, Mark S. *Awaiting the Heavenly Country: The Civil War and America's Culture of Death*. Cornell University Press, \$24.95 hardcover ISBN 9780801437618

Death and Dying in the Civil War

Awaiting the Heavenly Country: The Civil War and America's Culture of Death By Schantz, Mark S.

This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War By Faust, Drew Gilpin

One of the most memorable scenes in *Gone with the Wind* (both the novel and film) is of the crowd assembled outside of an Atlanta newspaper office trying to see the local casualty reports following the Battle of Gettysburg. Those assembled fight for copies of the galley proofs whose ink is not yet even dry. When Melanie and Scarlett finally obtain a copy, they quickly scan the "Ws" to determine if Ashley Wilkes is listed among the killed, wounded, or missing. Once they find that he is not a victim of the battle, Scarlett and Melanie soon realize that many of their friends who stand nearby them are less fortunate as their loved ones are listed among the dead. Both Mark S. Schantz and Drew Gilpin Faust have written books that deal with how Civil War participants, like the residents of Atlanta in the summer of 1863, learned about and coped with the news of the death of fathers, brothers, and sons.

Schantz explains the "wider cultural matrix" of the Civil War by emphasizing how "the ideas and attitudes Americans held about death in the middle of the nineteenth century" made it "easier" for them "to kill and be killed" during the conflict (2). He stresses that "Southerners and Northerners" did not "set out *consciously* to kill themselves because they knew they would all meet again in heaven or because they grasped that their deaths might be

politically valuable or aesthetically pleasing" (3). Rather, he concludes that Americans' view of death before the conflict promoted "a wider cultural climate that facilitated the carnage of war" (3).

Schantz describes how antebellum Americans dealt with death by examining a wide variety of sources including diaries, funeral sermons, and correspondence. The high mortality rate of the prewar years, often exacerbated by economic growth, he notes, "prayed on parents and children alike" (13) as epidemics ravaged both towns and the countryside. Indeed, he goes so far as to claim that "the siege of an epidemic was to experience a level of chaos and destruction that approached the carnage created by warfare" (13) as these peacetime "scenes of mass death, burial trenches, and refugees call to mind parallels with Civil War battlefields" (15). What Schantz finds particularly significant is how the "common element of acceptance" of death spanned "across the divides of race, region, age, and gender" (36).

In subsequent chapters Schantz provides insight into how the antebellum rural cemetery movement played a multi-faceted role in shaping attitudes about death. Most concretely, by linking the rural cemetery movement and its emphasis on Greek revival culture Schantz speculates how the latter's stress on "martial and civic achievement" instilled in young men "a powerful incentive to risk their lives" (73) to win the type of glory they found praised by Homer and Thucydides.

By far Schantz's most innovative use of primary sources is demonstrated in Chapter Four when examining the death poetry in the *Southern Literary Messenger* between the Mexican War and the Civil War. He draws a close and interesting connection between this poetry and the rural cemetery movement by noting how both concluded that "the virtue of fame was immortality" (117). Thus, he finds, that those "who fought the Civil War had grown up on a steady literary diet that valorized death in its most terrible prospect" and speculates "might not this have had an impact on the willingness of Americans to tolerate, and perhaps even to celebrate, the mass casualties that they would inflict on each other in the 1860s" (119).

One of Schantz's greatest contributions, the focus of Chapter Five, is his analysis of how African Americans also were influenced by antebellum perceptions of death and particularly the link African Americans drew between slavery and death. He states that the "willingness to court death in the pursuit of

freedom" as demonstrated through the literature on slave suicide "was certainly a feature of antebellum slave life and may also have steeled African Americans during the conflict of the Civil War" (152).

Despite this book's many interesting observations, its focus is largely on antebellum rather than wartime America as at most only one-tenth of the text directly relates to the war years. In other words, Schantz tries to link what happened during the conflict to what prevailed previously, but does so only by using the war itself in passing. Indeed, as noted in many of the quotes cited above, the connections between the antebellum and war years are often qualified with such words as "may have," "might not this have," and "perhaps."

As they read Schantz's book students of the Civil War will constantly be looking for that piece of evidence that will feature some wartime participant noting that this war was hell, but at least he or she could cope with it because they have lived through hell even before the conflict began. Unfortunately, such evidence is never provided. Perhaps if we accept Schantz's thesis, people who experience a degree of continuity as he claims existed are not very likely to have made that connection. The problem in this case, however, is that so many Civil War participants, in fact, suggested that this war was like nothing they had ever experienced.

The one exception to this generalization is found in Schantz's exploration of how mourning and death in antebellum and wartime America was shown through memorial lithography, postmortem photography, and painting. Schantz argues that Civil War photographers "gestured toward antebellum tradition by showing (with a few prominent exceptions) dead bodies that retained their integrity and wholeness" (186). Indeed, he concludes that "[t]rading on the conventions of antebellum postmortem photography" wartime photographers "carefully manicured their battlefield scenes for public consumption. They assured citizens that men fell as whole beings even in the midst of horrific combat" (196). The problem with this interesting observation is that it raises the issue of why photographers felt the need to alter the reality. If these photographers realized that this represented a new type of death beyond American sensibilities, they clearly had broken from the prevailing antebellum cultural matrix because of what they personally witnessed. Further, why did soldiers who also witnessed this new reality not alter their mindset? It raises the possibility that civilians continued to retain their pre-existing sentiments because of the false images presented to them by the media and others.

Where Schantz focuses on the antebellum years, Faust's emphasizes the four years of the war. For Faust, "Death's significance for the Civil War generation arose as well from its violation of prevailing assumptions about life's proper end—about who should die, when and where, and under what circumstances" (xii). She concedes that while antebellum Americans were familiar with death, clearly "the patterns to which they were accustomed were in significant ways different from those that the war would introduce. The Civil War represented a dramatic shift in both incidence and experience" (xii). Faust describes the dimensions of this shift in eight chapters which parallel the various stages of grief: dying, killing, burying, naming, realizing, believing and doubting, accounting, and numbering. While each of these chapters deserves delineation, for the sake of space this review will only focus on the three most comparable to Schantz's book: dying, naming, and accounting.

One of the most significant ways antebellum and wartime death differed, as Faust notes in Chapter 1 ("Dying"), was that while Americans before the war generally experienced death at or near home with loved ones nearby, Civil War soldiers usually died hundreds if not thousands of miles from home and family. This was most noticeable for many soldiers because of the absence of women at men's death since, as Faust explains, antebellum women "bore such significant responsibility for the care of both the living and the dead" (9-10). Being separated from their families as they faced death was not only difficult for the soldiers but their loved-ones as well because "family members needed to witness a death in order to assess the state of the dying person's soul, for these critical last moments of life would epitomize his or her spiritual condition" (10). Faust reveals how soldiers, chaplains, nurses, and doctors tried to help families cope with this separation by writing letters in which they described the last moments of soldiers' lives.

Closely tied to the issue of dying, Faust's examination in Chapter 4 ("Naming") explains that identifying the dead soldiers posed the greatest challenge to prevailing sensibilities about death. She begins with the staggering statistic that "more than 40 percent of deceased Yankees and a far greater proportion of Confederates" (102) were never identified. Clearly it was difficult if not nearly impossible to console families for their losses when so many who had fallen remained simply unknown. Indeed, she observes that when the war began neither the Union nor the Confederate governments even felt it their responsibility to report the deaths of their soldiers to the deceased's family. By

far one of Faust's most interesting discussions is of the efforts of the United States Sanitary Commission to aid in the naming process, particularly by compiling a directory which was utilized to answer inquiries by Northern families about the fate of their loved ones. The Sanitary Commission, using a system of paid agents and relying on the "hard-headed realism and the order and discipline necessary to a modern age and a modern war" rather than the "humanitarian sympathy and religious benevolence of the Christian Commission" (110), Faust asserts, was eventually able to "successfully answer 70 percent of the requests for information" from the tens of thousands of inquiries it received.

The process of "Naming," Faust explains in Chapter 7 ("Accounting"), did not end at the war's conclusion, but really only just began as peacetime "offered an opportunity to attend to the dead in ways war had made impossible. Information could now flow freely across North and South; military officials would have time to augment and scrutinize incomplete casualty records; bodies scattered across the defeated Confederacy could be located and identified; the fallen could be honored without encroaching on the immediate and pressing needs of the living" (212). Faust focuses on the well-known efforts of Clara Barton who aided in this process, but sheds considerable new light on the tribulations of Edward B. Whitman, former chief quartermaster of the Military Division of the Tennessee, who was assigned the task of locating all the scattered federal graves in Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgian, Mississippi, and Alabama. Whitman and his reinternment crews, composed largely of black soldiers and civilians, faced the daunting task not only of dealing with the "natural forces" of decomposition but also the white violence in the South in the immediate postwar years which often mobilized against this federal effort. She stresses how the African-American community advanced Whitman's efforts to recognize deceased white as well as black federal soldiers. Whitman's labors as well as those by James Moore in the Eastern Theater by 1871 resulted in the reinternment of just over 300,000 Union soldiers, about half of whom could be named. Faust emphasizes how this reburial program marked an "extraordinary departure for the federal government, an indication of the very different sort of nation that had emerged as a result of civil war. The program's extensiveness, its cost, its location in national rather than state government, and its connection with the most personal dimensions of individuals' lives all would have been unimaginable before the war created its legions of dead, a constituency of the slain and their mourners, who would change the very definition of the nation and

its obligations" (236-237).

Of course, this governmental effort was confined only to the deceased federal soldiers as Faust also describes the "grassroots undertaking" (241) of white Southerners to reintern Confederate troops—a topic which has previously received considerable scholarly attention. Most importantly is Faust's conclusion that the postwar burial movements by both the federal government and the people of the Southern states "were unlike any graveyards that Americans had ever seen. These were not clusters of family tombstones in churchyards, nor garden cemeteries symbolizing the reunion of man with nature. Instead the Civil War cemetery contained ordered row after row of humble identical markers, hundreds of thousands of men, known and unknown, who represented not so much sorrow or particularity of a lost loved one as the enormous and all but unfathomable cost of the war" (248-249). As a result, Faust adds, "The establishment of national and Confederate cemeteries created the Civil War Dead as a category, as a collective that represented something more and something different from the many thousands of individual deaths that it comprised." Thus, the Civil War Dead were "no longer individual men but instead a force that would shape American public life for at least a century to come"—what she terms "a constituency of the slain . . . Whose very absence from American life made them a presence that could not be ignored" (249).

These two books touch directly on the perennial question of whether the Civil War truly marked a turning point or watershed in the nation's history. Not surprisingly, since Schantz looks back to the antebellum period and Faust largely looks forward to the postwar years, they come to different conclusions about this topic. Schantz's perspective is much more difficult to defend, especially because of its largely antebellum scope. Only a fuller examination of the war years can give credibility to his claim of continuity. Again, short of the proverbial smoking gun (with apologies for the pun), there are no examples of wartime Americans noting that their prewar culture prepared them for the harvest of deaths brought on by the war. Indeed, the contrary evidence is overwhelming. Further, Schantz's dearth of discussion of the war years makes it difficult to determine either the static or dynamic nature of how wartime participants experienced the conflict. Were they all equally prepared to deal with the enormous losses brought about by the war or were some better equipped than others? Schantz strongly contends that the antebellum cultural matrix regarding death was fairly universal so far as region, gender, age, and race. But was this just as true in 1862 as in 1861 and would it be just as true in 1863, 1864, and 1865 as the number of

deaths accelerated and as the military and government found it increasingly difficult to provide the degree of respect for these losses that these soldiers and their families would have expected given their antebellum views of death? Therefore, while it appears that Schantz's contention that the prewar view of death may have led Americans to go to war with fewer inhibitions than we might expect, his contention that these prewar sensibilities were not altered by the new realities of the conflict rests on much less firm ground.

Faust's thesis is surely the easier of the two to defend. Rather than ignoring the antebellum sentiment surrounding death, she suggests that it was the drastic departure from these critical antebellum patterns and how these circumstances only increased over time that compelled Americans to come to grips with how this war and its painful losses could not be reduced simply by relying on the past.

Schantz provides a very interesting explanation why Americans may have been prone to accept war in 1861. In what will be considered one of the most important Civil War books of the new century, Faust reveals how the conflict changed American culture.

Robert C. Kenzer is the William Binford Vest Professor History at the University of Richmond. He is the author of "The Uncertainty of Life: A Profile of Virginia's Civil War Widows," in Joan E. Cashin, ed., The War Was You and Me: Civilians in the American Civil War (2002).