

Death at the Edges of Empire: Fallen Soldiers, Cultural Memory, and the Making of an American Nation, 1863-1921

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Review

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Bontrager, Shannon. *Death at the Edges of Empire: Fallen Soldiers, Cultural Memory, and the Making of an American Nation, 1863-1921*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020. Xiv, 385.

Shannon Bontrager has written an intricate, impressive book about mourning, memory, and national identity. Some facets of his story are familiar, but he extends the sweep of his analysis in fresh and provocative directions, enlarging it, as the title suggests, to the edges of the American empire. At the core of the book is the evolution of the commemoration of the fallen citizen soldier from the advent of mass casualties during the American Civil War through the carnage of World War One. Keen to honor dead soldiers who had been deprived of the comforts of death within the bosom of their families, the Civil War generation expended impressive energy and resources to consecrate their graves through a system of national cemeteries.

Bontrager's particular contribution to the subject of Civil War death practices and commemoration is his emphasis on their ideological underpinnings. In brief accounts of the creation of the Marietta and Arlington national cemeteries following the Civil War he charts how the memory of the war was bleached of its most radical and egalitarian potential and instead became a vague celebration of national service. However, pinched this ideology of service was, it was flexible enough to extend to soldiers who died expanding the nation's boundaries. With forays into the burial of soldiers in newly purchased Alaska and of soldiers lost in the Indian Wars, Bontrager contends that Americans began the ideological trimming needed to not only contemplate but also legitimate a transnational empire.

In two especially fascinating chapters, Bontrager reveals the intertwined logistics of commemoration and empire. He recounts the retrieval of the hulk of the U.S. S. Maine twelve years after it exploded and sank in the harbor of Havana, Cuba in 1898. The sinking of the ship, allegedly by Spanish sabotage, had urged on the war fever that abruptly extended the American empire into the Pacific and Caribbean. The rationale for raising the ship was both to confirm

Spanish perfidy (and thus American intervention) and to retrieve the remains of the sailors who had died in the explosion. But the undertaking was beset by technical and political challenges; the hulk was enormous and Cuban national pride was repeatedly offended. Such challenges were magnified many fold when the American empire extended to the jungles of the Philippines. There the military went to extraordinary lengths to retrieve the bodies of American soldiers who died fighting disease and Filipino nationalists and to transport them back to the mainland. Bontrager describes military officials struggling to grapple with the “realities of imperialism” that simultaneously impeded recovery of the dead and administration of the empire.

The book closes with a highly original approach to the fashioning of the memory of the Great War. Bontrager first burrows into the private correspondence of Arthur Bluethenthal, a young Jewish-American from Wilmington, North Carolina who rushed to volunteer in Europe almost as soon as the war began. His letters reveal a young man with a robust libido and the conventional prejudices of his class, race, and gender. Had Bluethenthal not died heroically while serving as a pilot in the Lafayette Flying Corps in 1917 his service and letters might well be forgotten. But after his death his service was celebrated by both the French and leaders in his home state; his letters were expurgated and published as a testament to his courage and convictions. The same archives that preserved Bluethenthal’s jottings also collected the letters and mementos of countless other North Carolinians who served in the war as soldiers, sailors, pilots, and ambulance drivers. In the near term, Bontrager laments that these archives “decontextualized” the contradictions in American national service and imperialism. Yet, eventually, those same archives have provided us with the resources to glimpse the wartime experiences of participants who neither archivists nor the nation’s elites ever acknowledged.

The book concludes with a sobering meditation on President Warren G. Harding’s eulogy at the dedication of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery in 1921. Bontrager has a deft eye at the ironies of history; whereas only a small crowd heard Lincoln’s eloquence at Gettysburg, tens of thousands heard Harding’s eulogy as it was broadcast over radio. Whereas Lincoln had celebrated the birth of a “new freedom” and the sacrifice that had made it possible, Harding thrilled at the prospects for American economic influence across the globe. And whereas Lincoln had sacralized the graves of thousands, Harding elevated the tomb of a single unknown man as an enduring symbol of sacrifice. The signal virtue of the unknown soldier was he could be all things to all Americans; his ethnicity, race, and class were unknown

so none of the fissures within American society need be acknowledged as integral to the nation's tradition of national service.

A short review precludes attention to the other layers of this ambitious book. Bontrager's close readings of commemorative oratory from the Civil War to the 1920s alone are a significant contribution. Bontrager weaves together the memory of the Civil War, the conquest of the West, the Spanish-American War and World War One, topics that have often been treated discreetly. The result is a work that should interest scholars of all of these events. He also foregrounds the methodology of historical memory, in particular the scholarship of Jan Assmann. Although I find the theoretical scaffolding a diversion from Bontrager's original research, other readers may appreciate Bontrager's forthright acknowledgment of his intellectual debts and methodological groundings. Finally, the author deserves praise for his prose and authorial voice. The book is often poignant and unfailingly humane; these virtues give his critique of American national memory added punch. This book, in closing, testifies to a highly creative and intellectually ambitious scholar whose work -- this book and those to come -- merits close attention.

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Fitz Brundage's most recent book is *Civilizing Torture: An American Tradition*. He is currently writing a book on Civil War prison camps.