Final Resting Places: Reflections on the Meaning of Civil War Graves

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Review

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Ever since Abraham Lincoln made a few dedicatory remarks at Gettysburg, politicians, philosophers, and poets have been reflecting on the meaning of Civil War graves. This panoramic collection of 28 essays, plus a smart introduction by editors Brian Matthew Jordan and Jonathan W. White brings sensitivity, inclusion, and inquiry to the scholarly study of death and memory. Lines from Walt Whitman’s tremulous poetry appear in David Bright’s wonderful preface, which begins, as it should, with the tempered musings of Robert Penn Warren, who wrote The Legacy of the Civil War in 1961.

Jordan and White challenged the essayists, among whom number many noted historians and biographers, to tell unique stories that bring personal perspective to the expansive literature in the field, which includes, for example, Sarah. J. Purcell’s Spectacle of Grief: Public Funerals and Memory in the Civil War Era (2022) and Drew Gilpin Faust’s This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War (2009). Their intimate, approachable stories, which tend to soften scholarly detachment, involve methods ranging from genealogical and archival research to classroom projects, gumshoe sleuthing and field study. On page 101, Michael P. Gray reminds his students that “the Civil War seeps into our countryside, far from the traditional Civil War battlegrounds.” Hilary Green explains how she created the Hallowed Grounds Project and led interpretive tours to a slave cemetery on the University of Alabama campus in Tuscaloosa.
The authors slog about in untended fields and ruins, find granite remnants in backyards, visit a Confederate cemetery in Brazil, unearth a murder investigation, and even proffer an argument for an “unmemorial.”

When the essays came in, the editors must have been delighted. They wisely arranged them in just three broad categories: common soldiers and sailors, generals and their steeds, and civilians. At the expense of a few hard-to-classify outliers, they avoid the reductionism that sometimes dooms anthology projects. Any study of death on this scale can hardly be comprehensive, as the editors acknowledge, but the sweep of the project makes a splendid attempt. They identified two broad themes: the power of place and the malleability of symbols.

Place, the lieu de mémoire or site of memory first identified in a series of groundbreaking books by French historian Pierre Nora, is a difficult concept. Memory evokes irony, absence, silence, and erasure, no more permanent than a monument on a courthouse square or a graveyard plowed up for a new highway. We do not always know what we have lost until we find it, a kind of archeology of the unexpected. Edward J. Ayers, in a fine essay titled “Graves Forgotten and Found,” suggests that forgotten things sometimes can be recalled by new tools.

Many readers will be drawn first to the middle section, finding intriguing reflections about Robert E. Lee, U.S. Grant, and Joshua Chamberlain, as well as George Meade’s battle-scarred warhorse Old Baldy, whose head is mounted on the wall of the GAR Museum in Philadelphia. The remains of Lee’s warhorse Traveller are interred outside the Lee Chapel at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia, where the general himself lies in a crypt one floor below Edward Virginius Valentine’s recumbent sculpture, rendering Lee as the eternal “Marble Man” of the Lost Cause, but not without the controversy of Confederate remembrance.

Not far from the chapel, the hide of Stonewall Jackson’s steed Little Sorrell is on display at the
Virginia Military Institute. An estimated 1.5 million horses and mules, few as famous as the generals’ mounts, were killed in the war, unnamed and unremembered.

The Civilians section will appeal to readers curious about the final resting place of John Wilkes Booth, his unmarked grave hidden in plain sight in a family plot in a Baltimore cemetery. Terry Alford provides context for the whole Booth story, including various conspiracy theories, generating many outré facts. Booth’s corpse was exhumed in 1869 under orders from President Andrew Johnson. It was moved from its semi-secret burial spot in a Washington warehouse — a literal attempt to bury the past — to a funeral home in the city. From there, the remains were placed in a coffin and hauled down an alley to a train station for transfer to Baltimore. The alley ran past Ford’s Theater and was the same alley that served as Booth’s escape route after the assassination. Alford quips that the murderer thus ironically returned to the scene of the crime. Karen Joy Fowler’s 2022 historical novel Booth probably has generated more popular interest in the assassin and his peculiar family than recent novels about other Civil War era figures.

Elizabeth Keckly, White House insider and sometime confidant of Mary Todd Lincoln, reposed in an unmarked grave until a marker was dedicated in 2010 at National Harmony Memorial Park in Landover, Maryland. Michelle A. Krowl recounts her decades-long personal quest to visit Keckly’s grave and trace her peripatetic journey from slavery to celebrity to obscurity. Mark S. Schantz’s “Of Graves and the Color Line” sheds additional light on the complex double memory of the war fractured by race.

The first essay in the collection, “A Hollywood Grave” by Glenn W. LaFantasie, is a work of great poignancy, and the editors correctly give it the primacy it deserved. LaFantasie, the biographer of William C. Oates, begins and ends with the great void that comes with a loved one’s death, in the author’s case the death of his wife. This helps make comprehensible the
agony of the colonel of the 15th Alabama Infantry who had to leave his mortally wounded brother, 1st Lt. John Oates, behind on Little Round Top when swept off the precipice by Joshua Chamberlain and the 20th Maine at Gettysburg. William Oates, a lawyer, general, congressman and Alabama governor, was haunted by his brother’s death throughout his life. He was unable to learn the approximate location of John’s remains, probably in a mass grave in Hollywood Cemetery in Richmond, Virginia, until 1910. By then Oates was bedridden, almost blind, and close to death. LaFantasie learned of the grave only in 2004 through persistence and a bit of luck as he completed the biography. He and his wife were able to visit the grave. His essay shows how difficult it was for him, for William Oates and for the rest of us, to comprehend the great void.

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