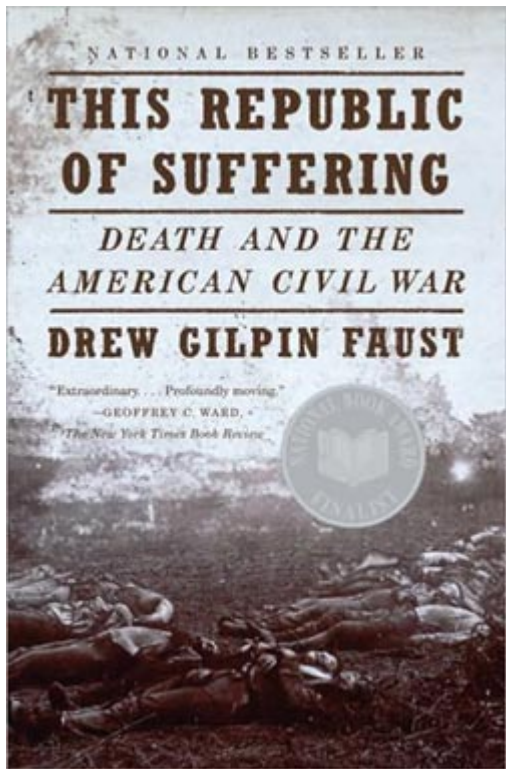


Death's Multiple Meanings

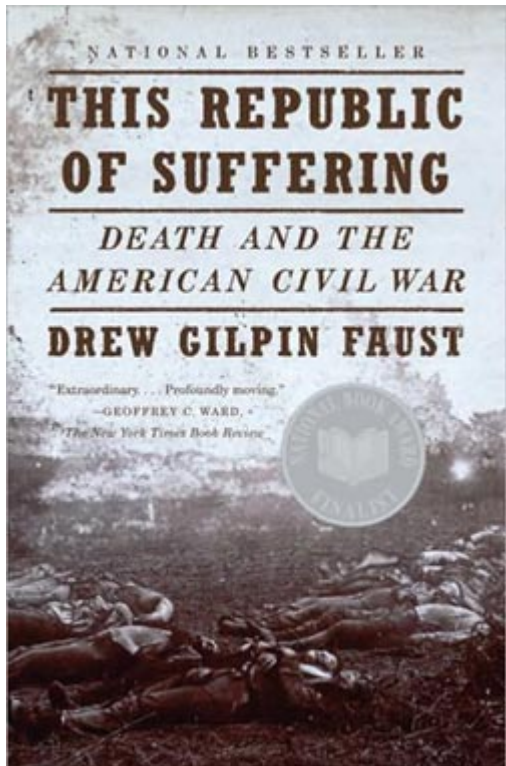


While the Civil War stripped hundreds of thousands of American families of both material and spiritual wealth, it did provide the nation with an abundance of human remains. Death darkened both the North and South during the Civil War, and Drew Gilpin Faust's recent book *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* explores the multifaceted ways in which death transformed American culture in the middle of the nineteenth century. Death's influence during the American Civil War was not limited to individual households; the living ascribed meanings to the dead that influenced science, fostered the growth of new businesses and technology, pushed the development of new bureaucracies, and shifted existing philosophical and religious beliefs. Simply stated, death permeated nearly every aspect of American life during the Civil War, and Faust asks her reader to reassess what we know about the Civil War, placing the voracious carnage of war at center stage. Faust argues that, "without agendas, without politics, the Dead became what their survivors chose to make them" (269).

Faust explains, "In the middle of the nineteenth century, the United States embarked on a new relationship with death, entering into a civil war that proved bloodier than any other conflict in American history ... " (xi). The Civil War, in fact, resulted in a greater number of deaths than the American Revolution, the War of 1812, the Mexican-American War, Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, and the Korean War combined. As death reshaped the American populace, so too did it reshape American culture.

A statistical analysis of death fails to tell the whole story of human loss during the war. Death in the United States during the middle of the nineteenth century embodied numerous and varied meanings. Soldiers spent much of their time worrying that they would die a "Good Death": an honorable death in battle, preferably at the hands of the enemy. The Good Death trope might include a dying soldier, clinging to a bible and a photograph of his wife or mother. This manner of dying was considered better than death by an accident or disease. Faust shows that soldiers spent a considerable amount of time reassuring the loved ones of recently deceased soldiers that their sons had indeed died within the parameters of Good Death. Though death worked to bind North and South together in certain ways, the two opposing sides of the conflict often engaged in different treatments of the dead. In the South, where supplies and materials were increasingly scarce as the war dragged on, cloth to create black mourning wear was hard to acquire, forcing Southern women to adjust their existing traditions in times of loss. Further, the practice of mourning a "Good Death" in a traditional manner was not always possible due to the realities of an increasingly modern battlefield. If a body had been destroyed so completely that it was rendered impossible to recognize, proper treatment and burial of the body became impossible. Faust writes, "Civilians found this outcome incomprehensible, but soldiers who had witnessed the destructiveness of battle understood all too well the reality of men instantly transformed into nothing. The implications of bodily disintegration for the immortality of both bodies and souls was troubling, and the disappearance of bodies rendered the search for names all the more important" (128-129).

Faust follows death's impact on American civilization as it threatened long-held beliefs toward religion and philosophy. In 1864, the first national spiritualists convention took place in Chicago, and virtually all Americans believed that some form of communication with the dead was possible. Séances had been popular for some time, especially after they became popular in New York in the 1840s, but the increasing number of young men dying early as a result of war brought about an explosion of attempts to communicate with the dead. Material concerns emerged as well; the limbs lost and mutilated in battle led soldiers and their families to consider questions about how bodies would look and feel in heaven. The meaning of fighting, too, seemed less clear in light of the deaths gripping the nation. Many observers believed the meanings they attributed to the gruesome fighting came up short as the war came to a conclusion. Some—Faust offers Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. as an example—lost their belief in beliefs entirely. Though the wheels of intellectual and cultural change may well have been in motion at the outset of the war, the Civil War changed much of the nature of American discourse. Faust states, "Into this environment of cultural ferment, the Civil War introduced mass death" (174).



Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*. New York: Knopf, 2008. 368 pp., hardcover, \$27.95.

Death changed America's relationship with religion and philosophy, but the Civil War fatalities also created a new commodity: the dead. Undertakers and coffin builders were in high demand following each major battle. Early in the war, families that could afford to do so brought bodies home in sealed, cold coffins. Families were concerned, with reason, that the wrong body might be sent home from battlefields, and they hoped to keep the remains intact long enough to check that their deceased was indeed a family member. Eventually, the new technology of embalming created a new market for professionals who set up shop near recent battlefields. In a macabre take on advertising, undertakers in Washington, D.C., attempted to reassure families who might be suspicious of the new technology by displaying embalmed bodies in the windows of their offices.

Faust succeeds admirably in her goal of presenting a new perspective on the legacy of death in post-Civil War America. What this book lacks, however, is a full examination of how death influenced both medical and anthropological science. The Army Medical Museum (AMM), founded during the Civil War with a focus on those who died in battle, would become a center for the study of what was then called "comparative anatomy," though it might be better explained as racial science. From the close of the Civil War to the turn of the century, the AMM collections also became central to anthropological science. Collections of Civil War dead were supplemented with collections sent to the museum from battlefields in the American West, where thousands of Native American bodies had been collected for science. The collection grew to include bodies from around the globe. The large collection of human remains from around the world intended for "comparative anatomy" was eventually transferred to the

Smithsonian and became the cornerstone for a new division of physical anthropology. The AMM, which became a component of the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, had switched its focus from bones, important to battlefield pathology and comparative racial science, to the collecting of soft tissues, important to the modern study of disease some years following the war. Through a notable twist that would fit with Faust's narrative, the AMM occupied, for a brief time, Ford's Theater, the site of Abraham Lincoln's assassination. Before the close of the century, the site of Ford's Theater became the home of the Compiled Military Service Records Office, which attempted to create an archive tracking the fate of every soldier who fought in the war. In 1893, a portion of the theater collapsed under the shear weight of the paperwork. Though Faust might have paid more attention to the manner in which the Civil War dead influenced the development of science in the United States, her existing approach to the topic can hardly be faulted.

This Republic of Suffering, the 2009 winner of the Bancroft Prize from Columbia University, is a captivating work of history. The author has a firm grip on the astonishing nature of her subject matter and delicately threads the reader through death's various meanings during the Civil War. The work is both well documented and elegantly written, touching on subjects from the curious to the downright macabre. Those interested in Civil War history, the history of the body, and cultural attitudes toward death should find this book compelling.