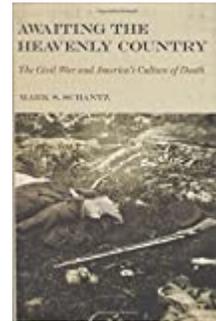




Mark S. Schantz. *Awaiting the Heavenly Country: The Civil War and America's Culture of Death.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008. xv + 245 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-3761-8.



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The Civil War and the American Culture of Death

With a death toll of over 620,000 men it is surprising how little has been written on the issue of death itself in the Civil War. Recently, however, historians have sought to rectify this deficiency in the literature on the culture and magnitude of death during the Civil War. Mark S. Schantz's *Awaiting the Heavenly Country: The Civil War and America's Culture of Death* provides insight into this crucial aspect of America during the conflict. Based upon primary as well as secondary sources the book builds on recent works on the topic, such as Drew Gilpin Faust's *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (2008) and Gary Laderman's *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883* (1996).

As Faust did, Schantz approaches the topic from the point of view of all Americans as opposed to focusing just on one region of the country. Noting that there were many similarities in the way that Northerners and Southerners viewed and approached death, Schantz illustrates the ways in which death was accepted as a normal part of people's lives in the nineteenth century. Indeed, he claims that antebellum Americans' assumptions

about death facilitated the unprecedented destructiveness of the Civil War. Indeed, he argues that the great destructiveness of the Civil War might be seen, in part, as the product of cultural attitudes and assumptions about death that may seem alien to our world (p. 5). Exploring the diverse aspects of death that ranged from the consolation literature that prescribed the proper death to the relationship between slavery and death to the poetry and imagery surrounding and idolizing death, Schantz demonstrates the way in which the culture of death in the antebellum world allowed Americans to deal with the mass carnage of the Civil War.

The book unfolds as a series of interconnected, interpretive essays that are intended to provide an analysis of the subject rather than a comprehensive discussion of death in the Civil War (p. 3). In this effort, Schantz is successful. He illustrates that Americans entered the war with attitudes about death that allowed them to kill and be killed. The first chapter discusses the ways in which an increasingly urban American society became more intimately aware of death with the spread of dis-

eases such as consumption. An image developed of how an individual could die a good death. This image of the proper manner in which to die was based upon classicism and religion. Both American conceptions of Christianity and examples from the ancient past portrayed death as something to be accepted with repose. The image of the deathbed with family and friends gathered round to witness the final moments usually involved some discussion of the afterlife. Tears were perfectly acceptable, but a resolved resignation expressed by the dying and those left behind was also expected.

The next chapter then explores conceptions of heaven. Images of a life after death, conceived of as a pain-free existence, helped people navigate death. Heaven was a place of peaceful tranquillity. In it, familial connections still remained and the hope of one day being reunited with loved ones eased the pain of their departing. These ideas of heaven helped with the final passing of individuals. If a better world, and one in which human bonds would still be experienced, awaited, then the immediate sorrow of the departure could be lessened.

The third chapter examines the rural cemetery movement and argues that it was a way to maintain a masculine accomplishment while preserving national history (p. 85). It also ties the rural cemetery movement to the heroic death and shows how it sought to preserve the dead among the living. Drawing upon classical ideas of stoic heroic deaths, Americans linked death to immortality, especially if one gave his life for a noble cause or chose death instead of sacrificing honor. The next chapter explores the ways in which poetry fit into this conception of death. This also fits nicely with Schantz's argument that Americans envisioned death in a particular

manner, which helped them to deal with it. He writes, "Americans had been well schooled to see the beauty inherent in death, to see the world that waited on a distant shore beyond this one and to celebrate the deaths of those who had fallen in a noble cause." Indeed, "to die in war was a beautiful thing" (p. 125).

The next chapter illustrates the ways in which slavery could be linked to death and how many slaves were willing to choose death over enslavement. The final chapter examines photographic imagery, including post-mortem pictures that idolized the serenity of the death scene. These morbid images became a part of American culture and offer another illustration of the pervasiveness of the presence and acceptance of death.

These essays collectively point to Schantz's argument that Americans were well familiar with death on a mass scale (p. 209). It does not seem possible, however, that anything could have completely prepared Americans for the magnitude of death associated with the Civil War. Based upon my extensive research on elite and middle-class white Alabama women during the Civil War as well as other recent scholarly work, Schantz's arguments on the pervasiveness of the culture of death appear accurate. His claim that the culture of death made Americans essentially prepared for the carnage of the Civil War is overstated. This issue notwithstanding, however, the book provides an excellent overview of different aspects of death in the Civil War. This well-written and thoroughly researched work should be read by all Civil War scholars who wish to more fully comprehend the Civil War as well as by individuals who wish to understand death in the Civil War.

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