

HISTORY

Mortal Nation

By Robert Wilson

AFTER MY BROTHER WAS killed in 1969 in the Vietnam War, I spent a decade having dreams that it was not really true. My family knew that no mistake had been made, but because the Air Force jet in which he had crashed was loaded with bombs, nothing was said, at least to me, about what was in his casket. The absence of a visible corpse, added to the general ravages of grief, produced irrational hopes, some of which I nursed while waking as well as asleep.

Imagine then, as Drew Gilpin Faust invites us to do in this valuable study, the bewildering intensity of sorrow the families of so many Civil War casualties must have felt. Even after the Confederacy's surrender at Appomattox, Faust writes, "Many soldiers lay unburied, their bones littering battlefields across the South; still more had been hastily interred where they fell, far from family and home; hundreds of thousands remained unidentified, their losses unaccounted for."

One reason for this appalling situation was the unprecedented number of soldiers killed on both sides, by more efficient weapons as well as infection and disease. Neither government was prepared to handle so many casualties. The task of burying the dead often fell to the victorious army, which controlled the battlefield, but which could barely be bothered to take care of its own casualties, much less the enemy's. Shockingly little official accounting of the dead was done immediately after a battle. Faust points out that neither government felt a responsibility to provide the families of the missing or dead any definitive information. So the bereaved often took on this burden, traveling to battlefields and hospitals in search of news. Some relatives of the missing kept looking for

them for the rest of their own lives.

This Republic of Suffering approaches Civil War deaths first from the viewpoint of the soldiers themselves, who did the dying and the killing, and who saw death around them on an unimaginable scale. But just as in *Mothers of Invention* (1996), her award-winning history of Southern women's experience of the war, Faust's focus is on the emotional effects of the war on those back home, not only during the war but in the decades after. The Civil War worked innumerable changes in individual lives, evoking fervent patriotism and religiosity in some and profound skepticism in others—including such writers as Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville, and Ambrose Bierce, each of whom helped usher in a modern form of consciousness that called into question the possibility of certainty.

The search for meaning that uncertainty created expressed itself in two seemingly opposite ways. One was a heightened sensitivity to the individual death. The idea of the Good Death, one in which the soldier died calmly speaking of his family, country, and creator, was ritualistically reported to families of the fallen by fellow soldiers, commanders, clergymen, or surgeons. But when so many soldiers died anonymously, "identified only, as Walt Whitman put it, 'by the significant word UNKNOWN,'" the need increased throughout the war for the governments to ensure that the names and bodies were preserved in an orderly way. "The strongest impetus for these changes," Faust writes, "was the anguish of wives, parents, siblings, and children who found undocumented, unconfirmed, and unrecognized loss intolerable."

The second result of the search for meaning was "the emerging notion of the Civil War dead as a describable and shared national loss that transcended individual bereavements." The dead on both sides had a collective importance that gave the war a heightened meaning and ennobled the impulses that had led to it. This idea, and the widespread local tendency after

THIS REPUBLIC OF SUFFERING:

Death and the American Civil War.

By Drew Gilpin Faust.
Knopf. 346 pp. \$27.95

the war to desecrate the graves of the enemy, led to the creation of vast national cemeteries where isolated gravestones and bodies spread across the countryside could be gathered, tended, and protected. This process of reburial continued for many years, as did attempts to identify the unknown dead and to compile lists of those who had served. These efforts, supported by Congress and the War Department, “involved a dramatically new understanding of the relationship of the citizen and the state,” affirming the importance of individuals as the “lifeblood” of the nation, Faust writes.

Faust, the president of Harvard and a distinguished scholar, builds her book by accretion rather than through narration. If it is sometimes repetitive and schematic, it is also comprehensive and persuasive. She directs her attention always to the South as well as the North, as befits her thesis that the shared suffering of the two finally made the nation one again.

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Lost and Found

By Rebecca A. Clay

JOHN ROWLANDS’S MOTHER never taught him not to lie. She had neither the time nor the moral inclination: She abandoned her illegitimate son shortly after his birth in Wales in 1841 and didn’t reconnect with him in any real sense until he was well on his way to becoming the world-famous explorer known as Henry Morton Stanley.

That rejection—and his insecurity about social status—drove the grown-up Stanley to say anything for the sake of a good story. A new name wasn’t his only invention. After spending much of his youth in a workhouse, he arrived in the United States in 1859 and created a new nationality (American) and a new father (a wealthy New

Orleans cotton dealer). Even “Dr. Livingstone, I presume”—his famous greeting to the long-lost missionary and explorer David Livingstone—turns out to have been a fabrication. Stanley’s efforts at self-invention not only shaped his life, they also proved his undoing. Drawing on a vast trove of newly available materials from the Stanley family archives in Brussels, Tim Jeal’s rip-roaring biography—overflowing with cannibals, exotic diseases, and treacherous cataracts—aims to set the record straight and undo the damage wrought by critics and by Stanley himself.

Even by the time of Stanley’s death in 1904, his reputation was in tatters. Though he had reclaimed his British citizenship, he was denied the honor of being buried in Westminster Abbey near Livingstone’s grave, as he had wished. These days, if remembered at all, Stanley is regarded as a racist who brutalized the natives on his African expeditions and helped King Leopold II of Belgium establish his own personal colony in the Congo—a horrifying regime that led to the exploitation, mutilation, and death of millions of Africans. Indeed, Stanley is often thought to be the model for the evil Mr. Kurtz in Joseph Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness*. But Jeal makes a convincing case that Stanley was not only the most impressive but also the least racist of the European explorers trudging around Africa during the Victorian era.

Clad in a pressed flannel suit and a white helmet, Stanley found Livingstone—emaciated from dysentery, without supplies, and accompanied by only four of his original 59 followers. The newspaper accounts he wrote about the expedition for *The New York Herald* became literary sensations. He then made a 7,000-mile journey across Africa, during which he mapped the course of the Congo River and thus solved many of the geographic puzzles of the central African watershed. And he led a relief mission to rescue Emin Pasha, a shadowy German serving the British government in Sudan. At a time when “the planet’s remotest places seemed as inaccessible as the stars,” Jeal writes, the mere fact that Stanley came back from these expeditions alive was extraordinary.

STANLEY:

The Impossible Life of Africa’s Greatest Explorer.

By Tim Jeal. Yale Univ. Press. 570 pp. \$38