

Spectacle of Grief: Public Funerals and Memory in the Civil War Era, by Sarah J. Purcell. Civil War America Series. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022. xiv, 338 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 cloth.

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In *Spectacle of Grief*, Sarah J. Purcell argues that public funerals provided Americans with opportunities to demonstrate how they understood the nation and their place in it in light of the divisiveness surrounding the Civil War. While collective participation in such events might have helped reconstruct the shattered nation by reinforcing a sense of unity, this was not necessarily the case. Through public mourning, Purcell writes, “Americans projected often conflicting ideas about the nation onto famous figures whom they mourned, and they explored their divisions and commonalities” (6).

As evidence, Purcell describes the public observances surrounding the deaths of nine noted figures of the Civil War era: celebrated congressman Henry Clay, Union martyr Elmer Ellsworth, revered Confederate general Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson, international philanthropist George Peabody, Confederate Commander-in-Chief Robert E. Lee, abolitionist senator Charles Sumner, Lost Cause architect General Joseph E. Johnston, African-American statesman Frederick Douglass, and “Daughter of the Confederacy” Winnie Davis.

Taken together, these well-chosen individuals offer a cross-section of nineteenth-century America. They include both loyal Americans and Confederates, politicians, soldiers, and civilians. And while most of the nine are representative of the long-standing reverence in the United States for “great white men,” as Purcell puts it, the obsequies dedicated to Douglass and Davis indicate the dramatic changes wrought by the Civil War. Their funerals marked the first occasions that an African American and a woman were dignified as figures of national significance.

As Purcell details the complex yet incredibly meaningful rituals that accompanied public mourning, she also advances several arguments that will resonate with anyone interested in the cultural history of the Civil War and its memory. First, Purcell finds that the themes expressed in funeral rituals held before and during the war anticipated later developments in Civil War memory. Second, she draws attention to the fact that contestations over Civil War memory not only held ramifications for American national unity but also for international relations. Third, Purcell emphasizes how Civil War memory privileged

battlefield heroics over political achievements, though the latter were more impactful in securing racial equality. Fourth, she shows how the process of Americans molding the lives of the departed to their larger political and/or sectional agendas was incredibly convoluted—as in the effort to recast Douglass (who likely had white ancestry) as a “great white man” in order to reconcile his remarkable accomplishments with the popular belief that Black people were racially inferior (199–204).

Purcell makes these notable scholarly interventions while telling a thoroughly enjoyable story. Her work is richly detailed, reflecting exhaustive primary source research. Her narrative is largely centered in the East—where most of her subjects lived—and the Midwest appears only in passing. This is no failing on Purcell’s part, but rather promises compelling new directions for future studies. In my own research on Civil War commemoration in Missouri, for instance, I found that Union veterans took enormous pride that William Tecumseh Sherman chose to be buried in St. Louis. They believed it bestowed legitimacy on westerners’ often-overlooked contributions to the war. Other historians may follow Purcell’s lead to further unpack the complicated local dynamics of Civil War memory as illustrated through public mourning.

Importantly, Purcell sheds light on an imperative that transcended region—the popular need to make sense of the Civil War. She explains that as the great national projects of mourning and reconstruction unfolded in the war’s aftermath, funerals forced Americans to confront overwhelming feelings of grief and anxiety. In response, they developed competing interpretations of Civil War history. This process was deeply contested as rival groups of Americans mobilized mourning to promote their respective versions of that history. Sometimes, in grief, Americans found common ground; sometimes they rekindled wartime resentments; sometimes they did both at once. Still, Purcell insists, despite the often-contradictory meanings Americans drew from public funerals, they provide valuable insights into the evolution of American national identity.