

WOUNDED VETERANS AND THE SHIFTING MEANINGS OF THE CIVIL WAR

This paper is the text of the Conference Keynote Address given by Dr Frances Clarke, Lecturer in History at the University of Sydney and provides a considered, research-based examination of a most significant area of American history too often overlooked by Civil War enthusiasts.

A couple of months ago I came across an article titled “Civil War Painting, Why Are These Pictures So Terrible?” Expressing what many scholars still see as a truism, the author claimed that the predominantly sentimental poetry, literature, and painting produced during and immediately after the Civil War was somehow too shallow, trivial, and unrealistic to get to the heart of what “real” war meant to its participants. It’s not difficult to find the similar assessments of the art produced in the Civil War era. Until recently, it was common for scholars to argue that the first passable artistic depiction of the Civil War came from the pen of Stephen Crane, an author born ten years after the conflict began.

Crane’s book and his short stories express many of the themes we’ve come to expect in realistic depictions of battle. In most of what is now considered to be great war-literature, soldiers invariably confront the darkest human impulses, yielding their romantic illusions of battle in the face of war’s harsh realities. Crane and authors like him populate their tales with men who confront the futility of heroism in a meaningless universe. Discovering that the propaganda that’s led them to war is little but empty rhetoric, they leave their homes and immerse themselves in the alien landscape of war, only to find that their pre-war lives have become profoundly anachronistic, generating an often bitter separation from the folks back home. Here are images of war that modern readers find readily comprehensible - a sharply divided war-zone and home-front, unredeemed carnage, and bitter, bewildered or disaffected soldiers. This is what I expected to find when I first came across narratives written by Civil War soldiers.

I didn’t start out intending to study the Civil War. When I entered graduate school in America I had another topic in mind entirely and, shortly after arriving, I diligently set off for the Library of Congress in Washington to research this now long-forgotten subject. It took a while for the boxes I’d ordered to arrive, and in the meantime I sat flipping through an annotated guide to the Library’s holdings. One particular entry caught my eye: an archival collection containing four hundred narratives written in 1866 and 1867 by soldiers who had lost limbs during the Civil War. As anyone who has ever researched a topic in the period before the twentieth century knows, it’s hard enough to find a few dozen sources written by ordinary people about their experiences in the distant past. Yet here, apparently, were hundreds of narratives in a single place. So I thought I’d take a quick look at his material, little realizing that ten years later I’d still be pondering its meaning.

Half a dozen narrow archival boxes arrived at my desk. Opening the first one, I discovered that a man by the name of William Bourne had been instrumental in gathering these narratives. During the war, Bourne had worked as a nurse among wounded and sick Union soldiers, and he’d published his own newspaper, *A Soldier’s Friend*, to provide information to veterans newly released from hospital. As I poured over Bourne’s writing, it became clear that he was tremendously concerned by the creation of such vast armies. Through the pages of his newspaper, you could almost hear him thinking, would these millions of young soldiers return to their civilian lives? Would they be ruined by dissolute habits like thieving, drinking, and gambling picked up in the military? Above all, would they be capable of leading independent lives again after living so long under

military leadership? With all of these concerns at the back of his mind, William Bourne set out to do his part to solve the problem as he saw it. He focused on those white veterans whom he believed would have the hardest time finding work: amputees who had lost a right arm. In line with his belief that a lesson in self-help was all these men needed, Bourne created a penmanship competition to persuade one-armed men that they could learn to write with their left hands. Offering substantial cash prizes for those who displayed the best sample of writing, he received hundreds of entries to the first competition, held in 1866. A second competition the following year yielded more manuscripts, including a few from men who were forced to write using their mouths or feet, but all, with a single exception, written by white veterans.

It didn't surprise me that William Bourne had organized such a competition. But I was confused by what I found as I read the narratives he'd collected. First of all, none of these writers discussed the way they felt about their injuries. None focused on, or usually even referred to, their emotional or psychological response to being wounded. Nor could I find even a trace of anger or cynicism in the vast majority of entries. More surprisingly, few of these four hundred men focused on battlefield heroism. They tended to write about battles from a panoramic perspective, ignoring their own positions and concentrating on the movements of the Union army in general. To a remarkable degree, these were humble men, or at least unassuming when it came to discussing the singular parts they played in the war effort. Their pride, when it came through in their writing, often revolved around the way they dealt with their injuries, not with their battlefield participation. And a significant proportion talked about civilians (especially women) who had aided them in recovery. There was little sense that soldiers were a group apart from civilians in their suffering. Moreover, many wrote in a decidedly sentimental way, expressing the belief that the meaning of their war effort lay precisely in the manner of their suffering. But what really astonished me were the many who claimed that they had sacrificed an arm willingly, and were glad that they had done so. Where was the irony, the disaffection, the sense that war revealed something about human psychology or at least that it profoundly changed the men who participated in it? I went home thinking that these narratives were fairly worthless for any purpose I might devise because they told me little about what the "real" Civil War was like. Surely, I thought, these men were consciously adopting particular personas because they knew that Bourne planned to display their manuscripts before the public.

Yet the more I reflected on this writing, the harder I found it to dismiss. After all, these men were free to write whatever they chose, since prizes were awarded solely on the basis of penmanship, not on a manuscript's contents. Certainly, men writing for an audience would have shaped their narratives in light of cultural conventions, but then they also experienced their injuries through these same conventions, not outside of them. Nor do we have any reason to assume that these writers didn't share the values and beliefs of their onlookers. Rather than considering these narratives as inaccurate reflections of what the writers really believed, I began to think of them as indications of their author's understandings of and negotiations within a particular cultural milieu.

So I went back to the archives with these thoughts in mind, and started looking at the way soldiers talked about suffering and sacrifice in other forms of published and unpublished writing, such as diaries, letters and memoirs. Eventually, this research became a single chapter in a larger study of the meanings that white Northerners invested in sacrifice, sympathy and benevolence in the Civil War and the way these meanings changed during the course of the century. Over the years, I've collected thousands of sources written by injured Union soldiers, far more than I'll ever be able to use. One of the things I learnt from this research is that there was very little difference between the sentiments and beliefs of Bourne's contestants and those of injured men writing in less public forums. But I also learnt something else. If most these soldiers accepted certain understandings of the war and sacrifice while their wounds were still fresh, many veterans came to revise their ideas substantially as the century wore on. I'll try to chart this transition today by looking at the way injured soldiers initially wrote about the war and then comparing these writings to veterans' late nineteenth-century war narratives.

As soon as I began searching for stories, poems, and images of injured soldiers, I quickly realized that they were represented everywhere during and war, no doubt because such men literally *were* everywhere. Hundreds of thousands of Union soldiers suffered serious injury and sickness as a result of military service, including roughly 30,000 Union amputees. In popular culture, limbless men appear in thousands of engravings and illustrations, poems, stories and compilations containing vignettes of military life. And, always, they seem to be telling the same story. Usually, they're smiling, or at least surrounded by people. Even more frequently, they're directly asserting that their limbs were but a small sacrifice for national union. Here's a typical story, reprinted in numerous publications, that depicts the selfless patriotism of Union soldiers:

A male volunteer working among the wounded comes across a dying man lying on the ground after a battle. "*Sergeant, where did they hit you?*" he queries. The sergeant replies "*Most up the ridge, sir.*" Trying again, the volunteer asks, "*I mean, sergeant, where did the ball strike you?*" "*Within twenty yards of the top,--almost up,*" the wounded man replies. "*No, no, sergeant; think of yourself for a moment; tell me where you are wounded;*" he persists. Throwing back the man's blanket, he finds that a shell had amputated the sergeant's arm. "*We could not get the dying colorbearer's (sic) attention to himself,*" the writer concludes. "*The fight and the flag held all his thoughts.*"

More frequently, writers purposefully sought to evoke strong emotions in readers, depicting dying drummer boys, or amputees calling for their comrades to sing "Rally Round the Flag Boys" before they lay down to die. Anyone who has even glanced at a Civil War era newspaper or poetry collection will know that this kind of writing was ubiquitous in this period. In countless poems and stories, Union soldiers gracefully accept death and mutilation in exchange for national integrity. Men with agonizing wounds wait uncomplainingly as others are cared for, the mutilated are universally jovial, and the dying inspire their onlookers as they consistently turn their last thoughts to home and heaven. These are exactly the kind of unrealistic portrayals that most scholars dismiss as nonsense.

They have good reasons for doing so. We know that all the dying did not go quietly after giving one last hurrah for the cause. We know that medical treatment was horrendous, and that the going into battle could be terrifying and appalling. From our vantage point, these stories are little but meaningless propaganda. Few scholars would dispute the fact that tales focusing on glorious deaths and cheerful suffering were didactic and propagandistic—part of the way civilian writers supported the war effort and sought to tell Union soldiers how they *should* behave. Yet it's equally clear that many Union soldiers did not find these stories meaningless, since so many sought to fashion themselves through their writing and behaviour in ways that mirror the ideals these stories contained, often by indicating that their injuries were necessary and their patriotism undaunted. Here's a representative example taken from a letter written late in the war by a private, William Newman, to a female friend. For this letter-writer, that the only facts worthy of note were those relating to the physical nature of his wound and the circumstances in which it was inflicted:

"[Y]ou wanted to know all about my leg," he wrote, "it is 6 months tomorrow Since my Leg was Amputated, it is taken off[f] below my Knee, and it is my right Leg." He went on to state: "I have no left the Bed yet, nor have any hopes of leving it for the nex[t] six month."

When his friend wrote back lamenting the war's devastation, Newman dismissed such regret:

"I am sorry to hear that so many of our place got crippled since the War commenced but it can't be helpt (sic). If I was well to day, and had my Leg I should go back in to the Army & fight the rebs as long untill I got crippld (sic) again or the rebs came back in to the Union."

Similarly, most of those who wrote manuscripts for Bourne right after the war emphasized that their sacrifices were freely made and meaningful in light of the overwhelming goal of saving the Union.

"Were such a thing possible, as the restoration of my arm, I would not have it restored. I consider it an honor and am proud of it," one amputee declared.

Another claimed

"if I had a dozen arms like it was i would [have] given them all sooner than have the states torn from this glorious Union which our forefathers fought for."

Likewise, Charles Coleman, another of Bourne's entrants, titled his manuscript, *"The Pleasures of a Soldier's Life,"* and he included the amputation of his limb among his other gratifying army experiences.

"Some may think this ought not to be mentioned with the pleasures of a soldiers life," he wrote, before going on to explain that he had been surrounded by "kind surgeons" and "tender nurses" who tried their utmost to save his limb. "Everything was procured for my comfort. I was sent home free of expense," while a benevolent government "paid my board, transportation, and for my arm, and is now paying me eight dollars per month. The pleasure in all this consists in knowing that my feeble efforts for the benefit of our common country are remembered and appreciated (sic) and...I cannot but feel happy to think that I lost my arm in so good a cause and for so just a government."

In this post-war narrative, Coleman asserts that "the great principle of love of country" led him to enlist, while supportive friends and loving parents

"buoyed me up in the trials and hardships consequent upon the life of a soldier."

Coleman thus depicts military service in terms commonly used throughout the war. Spurning praise for his individual achievements by terming them "feeble efforts," he employs a humble self-fashioning that was ubiquitous among Union troops. Instead of highlighting his individual accomplishments, he described a mutual quest undertaken by modest men who were sustained by an appreciative and sympathetic home-front. And he portrayed this quest in specifically ideological terms - as a fight to protect a polity so legitimate and revered that it commanded the allegiance of most Northern citizens.

This is interesting for several reasons: on the one hand, some historians have suggested that the beliefs and values that initially motivated Union soldiers were dramatically eroded by the harsh realities of combat. Yet these narratives fail to support such a conclusion. On the other hand, only the Confederate war effort now tends to be portrayed as an ideological war—a struggle to defend a particular kind of society. But if we listen to the way Union soldiers initially discussed the meaning of their service and sacrifice, it becomes clear that many held far more specific understandings of the war's meaning.

A minority of Union troops fought to end slavery - and this motivation comes through in a few of the manuscripts that Bourne received. Far more frequently, when amputees discussed the political meanings of the war they pointed out that secession presaged not just national disintegration, but also an end to republican government and thus a literal threat to their way of life. According to this line of thought, the Confederacy's success would indicate the bankruptcy of democratic republicanism by proving that democracies were incapable of managing the balance between minorities and the majority. As Lincoln had famously announced, letting the South go would demonstrate the "inability of the people to govern themselves." Secession would set a precedent,

many believed, inevitably causing what remained of the nation to dissolve into squabbling factions, a situation bound to require a permanent standing army and thus raising the threat of military despotism. If this scenario now appears farfetched, it would not have seemed so for men but two generations removed from the nation's founders, who had ample evidence of failed European revolutions and who now witnessed firsthand the fragility of republican government. Every Union soldier understood that republics in the past had collapsed into despotism and most wars had been followed by chaos and violence as soldiers were released back into civilian life. They had been schooled to believe that the fate of the republic hinged upon citizens' virtuous characters—on their civic-mindedness, their voluntarism and, above all, on manly self-sufficiency. So it's little wonder that they these were the traits they emphasized when they came to discuss the meaning of their wounds.

Instead of presenting their injuries as individual events, they represented them as part of a larger story of voluntarism and sacrifice that had been crucial to the war's outcome. So, for example, dozens of amputees spent their entire manuscripts paying tribute to female nurses or civilians, bearing out historian James McPherson's recent contention that the Civil War did not create the sort of antagonisms between soldiers and civilians that characterize twentieth-century war narratives. Instead, wounded men (like Union soldiers generally) reserved their condemnation solely for unpatriotic civilians, whom they denounced in no uncertain terms.

Similarly, telling stories about military heroism was apparently far less important or impressive to these injured soldiers than demonstrating the character they manifested in the face of injury—evidenced by the fact that so many writers drew on a language of self-discipline as they recounted their wounding and subsequent attempts to master life as a one-armed man. One amputee, for instance, titled his manuscript "Perseverance," claiming that those who had lost an arm were now forced to cultivate their wills:

"...the mental discipline they have received ... will in a great measure compensate, if not entirely repay them for the parts of their bodies they left on the different fields of strife," he maintained.

Likewise, large numbers pointed to the peaceful disbanding of the Union army as a singular demonstration of the self-disciplined nature of Northern manhood. Many scholars have suggested that speedy demobilization and a lack of interest in veterans' organizations in the period right after the war is proof that Union soldiers were so disillusioned that they quickly sought to forget military life. But when these writers proudly reported that they went straight home, "put on a suit of citizen's clothes," and found work, they were depicting themselves as ideal citizen soldiers, proclaiming that they had not been permanently brutalized or militarised by their experiences.

While the value of sacrifice for injured writers had been clearly established through military victory, large numbers invested their continual suffering with a spiritual power that they believed could transform their society. Figuring power as an inner strength and conceptualising the sacrifices in providential terms, many depicted injury as a God-given trial. Indeed, the majority of those who wrote manuscripts for Bourne employed a religious idiom, structuring their narratives around overcoming suffering and reconciling themselves to God's will. Phinicas Whitehouse was one of several amputees who pictured his wounding as a religious ordeal in an ode to his lost arm:

I look at this, the feeble thing before me—
The piteous wreck of what was once an arm—
And can you wonder, if a cloud comes o'er me?
If smiles are vain and kind words cease to charm.

But then he goes on to say that the cloud passes, and only an “ungrateful” man could continue to “murmur.” God has, after all, allowed him to live, and has left him with one “strong arm”:

With that, and Heaven to aid me, let me labor
With cheerful heart, whate'er my lot may be;
And though may rust the rifle and the sabre,
May that lone arm a final 'victory' see!

For soldiers like Whitehouse, adopting a light-hearted response to affliction served to reaffirm and herald the power of their faith - and was specifically designed to inspire similar behaviour in others. As these men asserted time and again, their wounds and the way they bore them would stand as inspirational reminders of the sacrifices inherent in self-government.

Rather than romanticizing these men - treating them as if they're simply more patriotic and selfless than today's youth - it's important to recognize that the Civil War took place within, and helped to create, a context that allowed these men to consider their injuries not in terms of a personal loss, but as a continuing form of public participation. This context includes the mid-nineteenth century interpretations of what it meant to be an admirable man. Most of those who have written about Civil War injuries draw from literature written after the First World War, which almost universally interprets the loss of a limb as a mark of feminisation or humiliation. But as numerous studies have shown, ideal manhood in the mid-nineteenth century North did not rest on the physical proportions or attributes of the male body. Instead, the middle-class spokespeople, who shaped definitions of ideal manhood, emphasized self-control and upright moral character.

Well before the Civil War the extension of the marketplace had drawn Northern men into a new world of ceaseless striving, and many began directing their energies toward self-discipline and self-improvement, believing that hard work rather than talent was the key to social advancement. In line with this notion that any man could rise to the top, so long as he maintained character-traits like frugality, temperance, and a good work ethic, writers emphasized control of bodily desires and passions through the development of a strong character and resolute will. In this period, physical strength and bulk were attributes more commonly associated with labourers and slaves than with ideal men.

Because admirable manhood was understood to rest on self-discipline rather than physicality, white men's identities at this time were often couched in terms of difference from those who purportedly lacked self-control, namely women, and men of supposedly “lesser” races (particularly African-American men). Likewise, Northern writers generally pictured their superiority over Confederates by pointing to what they saw as a lack of self-discipline in the South. Arguing that the slave system had produced a society of abnormal self-indulgence, brutality, laziness, and immorality, Northerners often depicted Confederates as men who held honest labour in contempt and gave free reign to the violent passions that incited the war. All of the stories holding up exemplary Union sufferers existed alongside negative portrayals of Confederates, commonly shown as fretful and bitter upon receiving wounds since they supposedly lacked the self-control of their Union counterparts. As one Northern hospital worker put it:

“The chance of a Southerner to live after going to a hospital is not over a fourth as good as for one of our Northern boys. They can do more fighting with less food while in the field, but when the excitement is over they lose heart and die.”

As this quote suggests, Northerners had no problem acknowledging that Southern men were brave, but most insisted that only those who fought in a virtuous cause, sustained by the moral character produced by Northern society, could maintain their spirits in the face of suffering. It is this context that allowed Henry Allen, one of Bourne's entrants, to claim that the loss of an arm “*was necessary to constitute me as a perfect man.*”

Rather than conceiving of “a perfect man” as someone of strong body or abstract bravery, Allen focused on the way his war wound exhibited his political commitments and his character in the face of affliction - a character that he believed defined him as an ideal Northern man.

We don't just have their words to demonstrate the way these men sought to model these ideals, we also have their actions. Consider, for example, the fact that most Union soldiers who lost a limb continued in military service throughout the war. Fewer than 6,000 amputees sought an immediate discharge, while over two-thirds chose to remain on duty (most as members of the VRC). Moreover, despite the fact that the federal government offered prosthetic limbs to Union amputees free of charge, the majority chose not to wear them, with only a few thousand taking up this offer. One study examining photographs of Civil War amputees similarly reveals that the vast majority effectively drew attention to their missing arms and legs by taking up empty sleeves and trouser legs and attaching them to other parts of their clothing. More surprisingly, pension legislation from 1866 onward provided \$15 per month for the loss of a limb, quite a substantial sum at that time. By 1893, the Federal Government was spending a whopping 41.5% of its annual income on roughly a million Civil War pensioners. Yet only 9,000 amputees ever applied for the pensions to which they were automatically entitled.

The biographer of Dan Sickles, a union general who lost a leg at Gettysburg, once claimed that the general was so proud of his amputated limb that he would rather have given up his good leg than have had his missing one restored. Amputees with less fame and political clout than Sickles (clout that came partly from his unassailable war wound) might have felt differently once the first flush of the Union's victory had passed. Yet the intriguing fact that most amputees were willing to forego their pensions in order to demonstrate an unwavering commitment to self-help and independence suggests otherwise. If this is the case—if amputees as a group sought to uphold the beliefs and values that initially gave meaning to their sacrifices—then they were increasingly out of step with their peers by the last few decades of the century.

From roughly the 1880s onward, Union veterans began to write different kinds of narratives about their military experiences, ones much closer to what we now think of as realistic war literature. Gone from these later narratives was the focus on the war's political meanings, on redemptive suffering, patient or cheerful acceptance of deformity, and the intricate connections between the war-zone and the home-front. Instead, as veterans wrote about their experiences later in the century, they increasingly focused solely on their own participation in battle, detailing the minutiae of military campaigns. We can chart this shift, quite literally, by comparing the material that appeared in the Northern press from 1861 onward. Alice Fahs, a literary critic, recently surveyed material on the Civil War published in the nine most popular Northern periodicals from the beginning of the war to the turn of the century (including those publications most popular among soldiers, such as *Harper's Weekly*). During the war, over half of all portrayals of the war in these publications centred around experiences taking place on the home-front, especially sentimental dramas of family separation, romances with female heroines, tales of voluntary efforts, and adventure stories set in the border states. Only a minority of these stories consisted of first-person accounts of campaigns told by male narrators. Yet from the 1880s onward, Northern magazines published almost nothing but personal narratives focusing on battlefield participation.

Likewise, there is a shift in the tone and sentiments exhibited in late nineteenth century war narratives. It is quite striking the way these new war stories celebrated the rugged man rather than the patient sufferer, specifically rejecting the domestically-inclined, staunchly patriotic citizen-soldier of earlier narratives. To give just one example, I'll quote from a story published by Frank Wilkenson in 1887, describing battlefield casualties at Spotsylvania.

For several pages, Wilkenson continues in the following vein:

A solid shot ... struck him on the side. His entire bowels were torn out and slung in ribbons and shreds on the ground. He fell dead, but his arms and legs jerked convulsively a few times... During this battle I saw a Union picket knocked down.... he struggled to his feet, and with blood streaming from his head, he staggered aimlessly round and round in a circle, as sheep afflicted with grubs in the brain do. Instantly the Confederate sharpshooters opened fire on him and speedily killed him as he circled.

For this writer, as for other veterans, depicting wartime suffering without emotion had begun to tacitly denote the author's own ability to face death and pain with unflinching stoicism. Descriptions of the wounded now appeared, if at all, as brutal realities unredeemed by familial, patriotic or religious sentiment.

Moreover, unlike Northerners' wartime accounts that privileged the self-controlled behaviour of white Union troops, later narratives tended to make no distinction between the conduct of the two sides or, if anything, heralded the military bravery of Confederate soldiers. Wilkenson, for example, specifically honoured Confederate troops for their lack of emotions in the face of suffering. Reminiscences that privileged martial valour often tipped the scales toward greater appreciation of Confederate soldiers, who lacked the post-war pensions and other social rewards of Union soldiers. Enshrined in their lost cause myth, Confederate soldiers came to be "permanently cast in a military mould," as one historian has argued, making them the ultimate martial heroes.

There was nothing predetermined or inevitable about this reunion sentiment, nor this new way of writing about war. Why, then, did both become so pervasive? First, it should be noted that many Unionists saw victory as divine confirmation of their wartime objectives and conduct. They believed that the moral virtue and selflessness they had exhibited would be rewarded with what Lincoln termed a "new birth of freedom." All of the narratives that I quoted from earlier, which held up the exemplary sufferer as an embodiment of the war effort, rested on a belief in the power of moral example as a basis for individual redemption and social change. Few could have foreseen that that political, economic and social changes ushered in by the war would give rise to a post-bellum era markedly different from the one they envisaged.

The majority of Union veterans returned home to live in sparsely populated towns, expecting to spend their lives as farmers or apprentices working in small-scale industries, as they had done before the war. Yet from the mid 1870s onward, they confronted a vastly changed world. In the last three decades of the century, industrial output soared by 500% as small business and factories gave way to large corporations and bureaucracies. The enormous growth of wage labour and urbanization that resulted, coupled with widening disparities in wealth, dramatically curtailed white men's possibilities for independence, making them much more likely to work for someone else or to have lost control over the pace and hours of their labour by the turn of the century. This same period witnessed the largest immigration in American history, as twenty-three million foreigners poured into the country between 1880 and 1914 and immigrant "bosses" increasingly came to dominate the urban political scene. An enormous amount of labour unrest and economic instability followed in the wake of these changes, as a series of international depressions buffeted the American economy. And, just as white men's control over the nation's destiny was being challenged by immigrants and volatile economic forces, the first wave of the women's movement launched its demand for female suffrage. As ordinary white men grew increasingly disillusioned by the political corruption, rampant materialism and social conflict around them, most relinquished their former optimism in the moral perfectibility of humankind.

In this more secular age of laissez-faire individualism, a model of manhood based on self-control and moral character held far less appeal, even to middle-class and aspiring middle-class men. They only had to look around at the robber barons (most of whom hired substitutes during the war), to know that financial success in this new economic climate was obviously not the result of character traits like hard-work and moderation but of avarice, self-promotion, and ruthless competition. Influenced by the spread of social Darwinism, Northerners increasingly came to valorise physically powerful and economically aggressive men as leaders fit to ensure national supremacy in the global struggle for survival.

There is quite a prominent shift in images of ideal manhood in the last few decades of the century. One study examining depictions of male heroes throughout the nineteenth century, for example, argues that only in the last two decades of the century were heroic male figures defined by their strength and shape. Likewise, historians examining men's diaries have noted that up until the 1880s, diarists tended to chart efforts to improve their characters, and only after this time did they suddenly begin recording their programs of physical fitness. Similarly, this shift comes through in the language people used. The 1880s, for instance, saw the invention of a new noun "masculine"—which referred to the physical attributes of maleness, and to qualities like strength and aggressiveness—and which increasingly replaced the older word "manly", which had both moral and class dimensions, separating men on the basis of their characters.

Another word was invented in the last few decades of the century—"over civilization." Everywhere they looked, middling white men were being warned that their cushy lives were rendering them unfit to compete with other races, classes and nations. In countless self-help books directed at young men (which constituted the best-selling literature for men in this period), authors urged their pupils to be aggressive, determined, self-assertive. The effects of these injunctions were registered most dramatically in the new pastimes that boys and men adopted. The last two decades of the century witnessed an explosion of competitive sports: new activities like golf and tennis appeared; basketball, football and racing suddenly became huge spectator sports; inter-collegiate sports competitions began to grow in popularity, and, most noticeably, middling white men started registering an interest in sports that had previously been the province of working class men—especially billiards and boxing.

Just as men began to celebrate competitive individualism and rugged activities as an antidote to the difficulties of their age, they likewise began to portray the Civil War as a heroic time when men had the opportunity to test their mettle in combat. Oliver Wendell Holmes, one of the war's most famous veterans, memorably gave voice to this new way of looking at war. Addressing a Harvard University graduating class in 1895, Holmes told these would-be leaders that battlefield participation was the ultimate male experience, the only way men could feel "the passion of life at its top." He headed his speech "A Soldier's Faith," yet the faith he referred to was entirely secular and self-referential. Divesting the war of any larger meaning, political significance, or moral implication, he proclaimed:

"the faith is true and adorable which leads a soldier to throw away his life in obedience to a blindly accepted duty, in a cause which he little understands, in a plan of campaign of which he has no notion, under tactics of which he does not see the use."

War's "divine message," according to Holmes, was to teach men living in a "snug, over-safe corner of the world" that "struggle for life is the order of the world." Therefore, he asserted, "the book for the army is a war-song, not a hospital sketch."

Holmes fought and was wounded in the Civil War. He knew how popular "hospital sketches" had been during and immediately after the war - sketches that defined true manhood in terms of patient acceptance of injury, strong character, political commitment, and religious sentiment - and he is writing quite explicitly against this earlier vision of the war. His new interpretation of the war's meaning, where equally brave men fought simply for the sake of fighting, marked the culmination of a new way of understanding the Civil War. And it has dominated historical interpretations of this event until recently.

Ironically, Holmes' vision of the war could only gain credence once Northerners accepted key tenants of the lost cause myth. In line with this myth, the Confederates went to war to defend a noble but ultimately doomed civilization, and their loss was preordained - not by God, but by the superior industrialism and greater population of the North. As white Northerners like Holmes reassessed the virtues of industrialism, the idyllic image of the Old South began to seem far more appealing (not least because it evoked a time when leadership was firmly in the hands of white men). But Holmes' version of the war ultimately rendered the Union's victory hollow. The idea that Unionists had won a critical struggle that abolished slavery and preserved democratic republicanism hardly made sense in the light of a belief that slavery was destined to end anyway, and the North destined to triumph, not by virtue of moral superiority, but industrial capacity.

It's important to recognize how far late-nineteenth century understandings of the war had moved away from those that originally animated Northerners; but not because these earlier modes of understanding war were necessarily superior. After all, precisely because Northerners defined their victory in terms of moral superiority, manly independence and volunteerism, Northerners were quick to urge self-help as a cure all for ex-slaves, while ignoring the massive structural inequalities that stood in their way. We should try to understand these early interpretations of the war not so we can celebrate them but in order to have a more accurate history - one that provides a better, less condescending, answer to the question of how people in the past could take seriously all of that art that we now find so terrible.