

THIS REPUBLIC OF SUFFERING

Death and the
American Civil War

DREW GILPIN FAUST



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Preface

THE WORK OF DEATH

Mortality defines the human condition. “We all have our dead—we all have our Graves,” a Confederate Episcopal bishop observed in an 1862 sermon. Every era, he explained, must confront “like miseries”; every age must search for “like consolation.” Yet death has its discontinuities as well. Men and women approach death in ways shaped by history, by culture, by conditions that vary over time and across space. Even though “we all have our dead,” and even though we all die, we do so differently from generation to generation and from place to place.¹

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, a war that would presage the slaughter of World War I’s Western Front and the global carnage of the twentieth century. The number of soldiers who died between 1861 and 1865, an estimated 620,000, is approximately equal to the total American fatalities in the Revolution, the War of 1812, the Mexican War, the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, and the Korean War combined. The Civil War’s rate of death, its incidence in comparison with the size of the American population, was six times that of World War II. A similar rate, about 2 percent, in the United States today would mean six million fatalities. As the new southern nation struggled for survival against a wealthier and more populous enemy, its death toll reflected the disproportionate strains on its human capital. Confederate men died at a rate three times that of their Yankee counterparts; one in five white southern men of military age did not survive the Civil War.²

But these military statistics tell only a part of the story. The war killed civilians as well, as battles raged across farm and field, as

encampments of troops spread epidemic disease, as guerrillas snared women and even children in violence and reprisals, as draft rioters targeted innocent citizens, as shortages of food in parts of the South brought starvation. No one sought to document these deaths systematically, and no one has devised a method of undertaking a retrospective count. The distinguished Civil War historian James McPherson has estimated that there were fifty thousand civilian deaths during the war, and he has concluded that the overall mortality rate for the South exceeded that of any country in World War I and that of all but the region between the Rhine and the Volga in World War II. The American Civil War produced carnage that has often been thought reserved for the combination of technological proficiency and inhumanity characteristic of a later time.³

The impact and meaning of the war's death toll went beyond the sheer numbers who died. Death's significance for the Civil War generation arose as well from its violation of prevailing assumptions about life's proper end—about who should die, when and where, and under what circumstances. Death was hardly unfamiliar to mid-nineteenth-century Americans. By the beginning of the 1860s the rate of death in the United States had begun to decline, although dramatic improvements in longevity would not appear until late in the century. Americans of the immediate prewar era continued to be more closely acquainted with death than are their twenty-first-century counterparts. But the patterns to which they were accustomed were in significant ways different from those the war would introduce. The Civil War represented a dramatic shift in both incidence and experience. Mid-nineteenth-century Americans endured a high rate of infant mortality but expected that most individuals who reached young adulthood would survive at least into middle age. The war took young, healthy men and rapidly, often instantly, destroyed them with disease or injury. This marked a sharp and alarming departure from existing preconceptions about who should die. As Francis W. Palfrey wrote in an 1864 memorial for Union soldier Henry L. Abbott, "the blow seems heaviest when it strikes down those who are in the morning of life." A soldier was five times more

likely to die than he would have been if he had not entered the army. As a chaplain explained to his Connecticut regiment in the middle of the war, “neither he nor they had ever lived and faced death in such a time, with its peculiar conditions and necessities.” Civil War soldiers and civilians alike distinguished what many referred to as “ordinary death,” as it had occurred in prewar years, from the manner and frequency of death in Civil War battlefields, hospitals, and camps, and from the war’s interruptions of civilian lives.⁴

In the Civil War the United States, North and South, reaped what many participants described as a “harvest of death.” By the midpoint of the conflict, it seemed that in the South, “nearly every household mourns some loved one lost.” Loss became commonplace; death was no longer encountered individually; death’s threat, its proximity, and its actuality became the most widely shared of the war’s experiences. As a Confederate soldier observed, death “reigned with universal sway,” ruling homes and lives, demanding attention and response. The Civil War matters to us today because it ended slavery and helped to define the meanings of freedom, citizenship, and equality. It established a newly centralized nation-state and launched it on a trajectory of economic expansion and world influence. But for those Americans who lived in and through the Civil War, the texture of the experience, its warp and woof, was the presence of death. At war’s end this shared suffering would override persisting differences about the meanings of race, citizenship, and nationhood to establish sacrifice and its memorialization as the ground on which North and South would ultimately reunite. Even in our own time this fundamentally elegiac understanding of the Civil War retains a powerful hold.⁵

Death transformed the American nation as well as the hundreds of thousands of individuals directly affected by loss. The war created a veritable “republic of suffering,” in the words that Frederick Law Olmsted chose to describe the wounded and dying arriving at Union hospital ships on the Virginia Peninsula. Sacrifice and the state became inextricably intertwined. Citizen soldiers snatched from the midst of life generated obligations for a nation defining its purposes

and polity through military struggle. A war about union, citizenship, freedom, and human dignity required that the government attend to the needs of those who had died in its service. Execution of these newly recognized responsibilities would prove an important vehicle for the expansion of federal power that characterized the transformed postwar nation. The establishment of national cemeteries and the emergence of the Civil War pension system to care for both the dead and their survivors yielded programs of a scale and reach unimaginable before the war. Death created the modern American union—not just by ensuring national survival, but by shaping enduring national structures and commitments.⁶

Civil War Americans often wrote about what they called “the work of death,” meaning the duties of soldiers to fight, kill, and die, but at the same time invoking battle’s consequences: its slaughter, suffering, and devastation. “Work” in this usage incorporated both effort and impact—and the important connection between the two. Death in war does not simply happen; it requires action and agents. It must, first of all, be inflicted; and several million soldiers of the 1860s dedicated themselves to that purpose. But death also usually requires participation and response; it must be experienced and handled. It is work to die, to know how to approach and endure life’s last moments. Of all living things, only humans consciously anticipate death; the consequent need to choose how to behave in its face—to worry about how to die—distinguishes us from other animals. The need to manage death is the particular lot of humanity.⁷

It is work to deal with the dead as well, to remove them in the literal sense of disposing of their bodies, and it is also work to remove them in a more figurative sense. The bereaved struggle to separate themselves from the dead through ritual and mourning. Families and communities must repair the rent in the domestic and social fabric, and societies, nations, and cultures must work to understand and explain unfathomable loss.

This is a book about the work of death in the American Civil War. It seeks to describe how between 1861 and 1865—and into the



"The True Defenders of the Constitution." Engraving from a drawing
by James Walker. Harper's Weekly, November 11, 1865.

decades that followed—Americans undertook a kind of work that history has not adequately understood or recognized. Human beings are rarely simply passive victims of death. They are actors even if they are the diers; they prepare for death, imagine it, risk it, endure it, seek to understand it. And if they are survivors, they must assume new identities established by their persistence in face of others' annihilation. The presence and fear of death touched Civil War Americans' most fundamental sense of who they were, for in its threat of termination and transformation, death inevitably inspired self-scrutiny and self-definition. Beginning with individuals' confrontation with dying and killing, the book explores how those experiences transformed society, culture, and politics in what became a broader republic of shared suffering. Some of the changes death brought were social, as wives turned into widows, children into orphans; some were political, as African American soldiers hoped to win citi-

zenship and equality through their willingness both to die and to kill; some were philosophical and spiritual, as the carnage compelled Americans to seek meaning and explanation for war's destruction.

Every death involved "the great change" captured in the language and discourse of nineteenth-century Christianity, the shift from this life to whatever might come next. A subject of age-old concern for believers and nonbelievers alike, the existence and nature of an afterlife took on new urgency both for soldiers anxious about their own deaths and for bereaved kin speculating on the fate of the departed. And even if spirits and souls proved indeed immortal, there still remained the vexing question of bodies. The traditional notion that corporeal resurrection and restoration would accompany the Day of Judgment seemed increasingly implausible to many Americans who had seen the maiming and disfigurement inflicted by this war. Witnesses at field hospitals almost invariably commented with horror on the piles of limbs lying near the surgeon's table, dissociated from the bodies to which they had belonged, transformed into objects of revulsion instead of essential parts of people. These arms and legs seemed as unidentifiable—and unrestorable—as the tens of thousands of missing men who had been separated from their names. The integral relationship between the body and the human self it housed was as shattered as the wounded men.⁸

Bodies were in important ways the measure of the war—of its achievements and its impact; and indeed, bodies became highly visible in Civil War America. Commanders compared their own and enemy casualties as evidence of military success or failure. Soldiers struggled for the words to describe mangled corpses strewn across battlefields; families contemplated the significance of newspaper lists of wounds: "slightly, in the shoulder," "severely, in the groin," "mortally, in the breast." They nursed the dying and buried their remains. Letters and reports from the front rendered the physicality of injuries and death all but unavoidable. For the first time civilians directly confronted the reality of battlefield death rendered by the new art of photography. They found themselves transfixed by the paradoxically lifelike renderings of the slain of Antietam that



"Confederate Dead at Antietam, September 1862."
Photograph by Alexander Gardner. Library of Congress.

Mathew Brady exhibited in his studio on Broadway. If Brady "has not brought bodies and laid them in our dooryards and along the streets, he has done something very like it," wrote the *New York Times*.⁹

This new prominence of bodies overwhelmingly depicted their destruction and deformation, inevitably raising the question of how they related to the persons who had once inhabited them. In the aftermath of battle survivors often shoveled corpses into pits as they would dispose of animals—"in bunches, just like dead chickens," one observer noted—dehumanizing both the living and the dead through their disregard. In Civil War death the distinction between men and animals threatened to disappear, just as it was simultaneously eroding in the doctrines of nineteenth-century science.¹⁰

The Civil War confronted Americans with an enormous task, one quite different from saving or dividing the nation, ending or maintaining slavery, or winning the military conflict—the demands we customarily understand to have been made of the Civil War genera-

tion. Americans North and South would be compelled to confront—and resist—the war’s assault on their conceptions of how life should end, an assault that challenged their most fundamental assumptions about life’s value and meaning. As they faced horrors that forced them to question their ability to cope, their commitment to the war, even their faith in a righteous God, soldiers and civilians alike struggled to retain their most cherished beliefs, to make them work in the dramatically altered world that war had introduced. Americans had to identify—find, invent, create—the means and mechanisms to manage more than half a million dead: their deaths, their bodies, their loss. How they accomplished this task reshaped their individual lives—and deaths—at the same time that it redefined their nation and their culture. The work of death was Civil War America’s most fundamental and most demanding undertaking.

CHAPTER I

DYING

"To Lay Down My Life"

"Dying—annuls the power to kill."

EMILY DICKINSON, 1862

No one expected what the Civil War was to become. Southern secessionists believed northerners would never mobilize to halt national division or that they would mount nothing more than brief and ineffective resistance. South Carolina senator James Chesnut boldly promised to drink all the blood that might be shed as a result of the Confederate declaration of independence.¹ When military confrontation began to seem inevitable, northerners and southerners alike expected it to be of brief duration. The North entered the First Battle of Bull Run in the summer of 1861 anticipating a decisive victory that would quash the rebellion; Confederates thought the Union would quickly give up after initial reverses. Neither side could have imagined the magnitude and length of the conflict that unfolded, nor the death tolls that proved its terrible cost.

A number of factors contributed to these unanticipated and unprecedented losses. The first was simply the scale of the conflict itself. As a South Carolinian observed in 1863, "The world never saw such a war." Approximately 2.1 million northerners and 880,000 southerners took up arms between 1861 and 1865. In the South, three out of four white men of military age became soldiers. During the American Revolution the army never numbered more than 30,000 men.²

Changing military technology equipped these mass armies with new, longer-range weapons—muzzle-loading rifles—and provided some units, by the latter stages of the war, with dramatically increased firepower in the form of breech-loading and even repeating rifles. Railroads and emerging industrial capacity in both North and South made resupply and redeployment of armies easier, extending the duration of the war and the killing.

Yet for all the horrors of combat, soldiers dreaded dying of disease even more. Death from illness, one Iowa soldier observed, offered “all of the evils of the battlefield with none of its honors.” Twice as many Civil War soldiers died of disease as of battle wounds. The war, Union surgeon general William A. Hammond later observed, was fought at the “end of the medical middle ages.” Neither the germ theory nor the nature and necessity of antisepsis was yet understood. A wave of epidemic disease—measles, mumps, and smallpox—swept through the armies of volunteers in the early months of war, then yielded precedence to the intractable camp illnesses: diarrhea and dysentery, typhoid and malaria. Nearly three-quarters of Union soldiers suffered from serious bowel complaints in every year of the war; by 1865 the sick rate for diarrhea and dysentery was 995 per thousand. Contamination of water supply from camp latrines was a key cause of these illnesses, as it was of typhoid. “The camp sink,” one 1862 description of an all-too-typical Union bivouac reported, “is located between the tents and the river. It is covered with fresh earth twice a week . . . The men, however, generally make use of the ground in the vicinity.” Ether and chloroform had made military surgery a more plausible and widespread response to wounds, but lacking an understanding of antisepsis, physicians routinely spread infection with unclean instruments and dressings. After the Battle of Perryville in 1862, water was so scarce that Union surgeons performing amputations almost around the clock did not wash their hands for two days. Gangrene was so commonplace that most military hospitals had special wards or tents for its victims.³

Civil War soldiers had many opportunities to die and a variety of ways in which to do so. A war that was expected to be short-lived



Milton Wallen, Company C, First Kentucky Cavalry, in a prison hospital. "Dying of Gangrene." Watercolor by Edward Stauch.

National Museum of Health and Medicine, Armed Forces Institute of Pathology.

instead extended for four years and touched the life of nearly every American. A military adventure undertaken as an occasion for heroics and glory turned into a costly struggle of suffering and loss. As men became soldiers and contemplated battle, they confronted the very real possibility of death. They needed to be both willing and ready to die, and as they departed for war, they turned to the resources of their culture, codes of masculinity, patriotism, and religion to prepare themselves for what lay ahead. This was the initial work of death.

"Soldier," a Confederate chaplain reminded his troops in 1863, "your business is to die."⁴ Men in Civil War America went to war talking of glory and conquest, of saving or creating a nation, and of routing the enemy. But at the heart of the soldier's understanding of his duty rested the notion of sacrifice. E. G. Abbott was far from alone when he explained his motivation for entering the Union

army. "I came into this war," he wrote, "to lay down my life."⁵ As a Confederate soldier prayed, "my first desire should be not that I might escape death but that my death should help the cause of the right to triumph."⁶ The rhetoric of service—to nation, to God, to comrades—rationalized the violence of this devastating war by casting it as the instrument of both nationalist and Christian imperatives: soldiers would die for God and Country. "I did not go to war to murder. No! and . . . Our dear Lord knows it and he will stand by me," wrote John Weissert of Michigan, describing how "my hair stood on ends" as he surveyed the gruesome aftermath of battle.⁷ Focusing on dying rather than on killing enabled soldiers to mitigate their terrible responsibility for the slaughter of others. As men saw themselves mirrored in the faces of those expiring around them, they struggled to come to terms with the possibility and the significance of their own annihilation. Dying assumed clear preeminence over killing in the soldier's construction of his emotional and moral universe.

Civil War soldiers were, in fact, better prepared to die than to kill, for they lived in a culture that offered many lessons in how life should end. But these lessons had to be adapted to the dramatically changed circumstances of the Civil War. The concept of the Good Death was central to mid-nineteenth-century America, as it had long been at the core of Christian practice. Dying was an art, and the tradition of *ars moriendi* had provided rules of conduct for the moribund and their attendants since at least the fifteenth century: how to give up one's soul "gladlye and wilfully"; how to meet the devil's temptations of unbelief, despair, impatience, and worldly attachment; how to pattern one's dying on that of Christ; how to pray. Texts on the art of dying proliferated with the spread of vernacular printing, culminating in 1651 in London with Jeremy Taylor's *The Rule and Exercise of Holy Dying*. His revision of the originally Catholic *ars moriendi* proved not just a literary achievement but an intellectual triumph that firmly established the genre within Protestantism.⁸

By the nineteenth century Taylor's books had become classics, and the tradition of the *ars moriendi* was spread both through reprints of earlier texts and through more contemporary considerations of

the Good Death. Often these more modern renditions appeared in new contexts and genres: in sermons that focused on one or two aspects of the larger subject; in American Sunday School Union tracts distributed to youth across the nation; in popular health books that combined the expanding insights of medical science with older religious conventions about dying well; and in popular literature, with the exemplary deaths of Dickens's Little Nell, Thackeray's Colonel Newcome, or Harriet Beecher Stowe's Eva. So diverse and numerous were these representations of the Good Death that they reached a wide spectrum of the American population at midcentury, and they would become a central theme within the songs, stories, and poetry of the Civil War itself. By the 1860s many elements of the Good Death had been to a considerable degree separated from their explicitly theological roots and had become as much a part of respectable middle-class behavior and expectation in North and South as they were the product or emblem of any particular religious affiliation. Assumptions about the way to die remained central within both Catholic and Protestant faiths, but they had spread beyond formal religion to become a part of more general systems of belief held across the nation about life's meaning and life's appropriate end.⁹

The Good Death proved to be a concern shared by almost all Americans of every religious background. An overwhelming majority of Civil War soldiers, like Americans generally in the 1860s, was Protestant, and Protestant assumptions dominated discussions about death. But the need for wartime unity and solidarity produced an unprecedented level of religious interaction and cooperation that not only brought Protestant denominations together but to a considerable degree incorporated Catholics and Jews as well. The war encouraged a Protestant ecumenism that yielded interdenominational publication societies, common evangelical gatherings, and shared charitable efforts, like the Christian Commission, through which thousands of volunteers ministered to both spiritual and bodily needs of Union soldiers. But Civil War ecumenism extended beyond Protestantism. Catholic chaplains in both Union and Confederate armies remarked on the effective cooperation among pas-

tors and soldiers of differing religious affiliations. In one incident that became legend, Father William Corby offered a ceremony of general absolution to a brigade of Union troops before their engagement at Gettysburg. "Catholic and non-Catholic," Corby wrote, "showed a profound respect, wishing at this fatal crisis to receive every benefit of divine grace that could be imparted." The chaplain added generously that "general absolution was intended for all...not only for our brigade, but for all, North or South, who were susceptible of it and who were about to appear before their Judge."¹⁰

Even Jewish soldiers, who constituted less than three-tenths of a percent of Civil War armies, joined this common religiosity. Michael Allen, Jewish chaplain of a Pennsylvania regiment, held nondenominational Sunday services for his men, preaching on a variety of topics, including proper preparation for death. Although we today tend to assume sharp differences between Jewish and Christian views of death, and particularly the afterlife, these contrasts appeared far less dramatic to mid-nineteenth-century Americans. Drawing on traditions stretching back at least to Maimonides, Jews of the Civil War era shared Christians' anticipation of what one condolence letter called "a better life" to come. Rebecca Gratz of Philadelphia could comfort her sister-in-law that her son, killed at the Battle of Wilson's Creek, and his distraught father "shall be united in another world." Civil War death thus narrowed theological and denominational differences. The shared crisis of battle yielded a common effort to make the notion of a Good Death available to all.¹¹

Americans North and South agreed upon death's transcendent importance. A tract distributed to Confederate soldiers by the Presbyterian Church warned that "death is not to be regarded as a mere event in our history. It is not like a birth, or a marriage, or a painful accident, or a lingering sickness." It has an "importance that cannot be estimated by men." Death's significance arose from its absolute and unique permanence. "Death fixes our state. Here [on Earth] everything is changing and unsettled. Beyond the grave our condition is unchangeable." The moment of death could thus offer a glimpse of this future. "What you are when you die, the same will

you reappear in the great day of eternity. The features of character with which you leave the world will be seen in you when you rise from the dead." How one died thus epitomized a life already led and predicted the quality of life everlasting. The *hors mori*, the hour of death, had therefore to be witnessed, scrutinized, interpreted, narrated—not to mention carefully prepared for by any sinner who sought to be worthy of salvation. The sudden and all but unnoticed end of the soldier slain in the disorder of battle, the unattended deaths of unidentified diseased and wounded men denied these consolations. Civil War battlefields and hospitals could have provided the material for an exemplary text on how not to die.¹²

Soldiers and their families struggled in a variety of ways to mitigate such cruel realities, to construct a Good Death even amid chaos, to substitute for missing elements or compensate for unsatisfied expectations. Their successes and failures influenced not only the last moments of thousands of dying soldiers but also the attitudes and outlook of survivors who contended with the impact of these experiences for the rest of their lives.

Perhaps the most distressing aspect of death for many Civil War Americans was that thousands of young men were dying away from home. As one group of Confederate prisoners of war observed in a resolution commemorating a comrade's death in 1865, "we... deplore that he should die... in an enemy's land far from home and friends." Most soldiers would have shared the wishes of the Georgia man whose brother sadly wrote after his death in Virginia, "he always did desire... to die at home." Death customs of the Victorian era centered on domestic scenes and spaces; hospitals housed the indigent, not respectable citizens. As late as the first decade of the twentieth century, fewer than 15 percent of Americans died away from home. But the four years of civil war overturned these conventions and expectations, as soldiers died by the thousands in the company of strangers, even enemies. As a South Carolina woman remarked in 1863, it was "much more painful" to give up a "loved one [who] is a stranger in a strange land."¹³

Civil War soldiers experienced an isolation from relatives uncom-

mon among the free white population. The army, moreover, segregated men from women, who in the nineteenth century bore such significant responsibility for the care of both the living and the dead. As a hospital volunteer remarked of the Army of the Potomac, "of this hundred thousand men, I suppose not ten thousand were ever entirely without a mother's, a sister's, or a wife's domestic care before."¹⁴

Family was central to the *ars moriendi* tradition, for kin performed its essential rituals. Victorian ideals of domesticity further reinforced these assumptions about death's appropriate familial setting. One should die among family assembled around the deathbed. Relatives would of course be most likely to show concern about the comfort and needs of their dying loved one, but this was ultimately a secondary consideration. Far more important, family members needed to witness a death in order to assess the state of the dying person's soul, for these critical last moments of life would epitomize his or her spiritual condition. The dying were not losing their essential selves, but rather defining them for eternity. Kin would use their observations of the deathbed to evaluate the family's chances for a reunion in heaven. A life was a narrative that could only be incomplete without this final chapter, without the life-defining last words.¹⁵

Last words had always held a place of prominence in the *ars moriendi* tradition. By the eighteenth century "dying declarations" had assumed—as they still retain—explicit secular importance: a special evidentiary status excepting them from legal rules excluding hearsay. People believed final words to be the truth, both because they thought that a dying person could no longer have any earthly motivation to lie, and because those about to meet their maker would not want to expire bearing false witness. As sermonizers North and South reminded their congregations: "A death-bed's a detector of the heart."¹⁶

Last words also imposed meaning on the life narrative they concluded and communicated invaluable lessons to those gathered around the deathbed. This didactic function provided a critical means through which the deceased could continue to exist in the

lives of survivors. The teachings that last words imparted served as a lingering exhortation and a persisting tie between the living and the dead. To be deprived of these lessons, and thus this connection, seemed unbearable to many nineteenth-century Americans left at home while their sons, fathers, husbands, and brothers died with their words unrecorded or even unheard.

Americans thus sought to manage battlefield deaths in a way that mitigated separation from kin and offered a substitute for the traditional stylized deathbed performance. Soldiers, chaplains, military nurses, and doctors conspired to provide the dying man and his family with as many of the elements of the conventional Good Death as possible, struggling even in the chaos of war to make it possible for men—and their loved ones—to believe they had died well. Spiritual wounds demanded attention as powerfully as did those of the flesh. Battle deaths belonged to those at home as well as those in the field. The traditions of *ars moriendi* defined civilians as participants in war's losses and connected soldiers to those behind the lines. Both parties worked to ensure that soldiers would not die alone.¹⁷

Soldiers endeavored to provide themselves with surrogates: proxies for those who might have surrounded their deathbeds at home. Descriptions of battle's aftermath often remark on the photographs found alongside soldiers' corpses. Just as this new technology was capable of bringing scenes from battlefield to home front, as in Brady's exhibition of Antietam dead in New York, more often the reverse occurred. A dead Yankee soldier at Gettysburg was found with an ambrotype of three children "tightly clasped in his hands." The ultimately successful effort to identify him created a sensation, with magazine and newspaper articles, poems, and songs celebrating the devoted father, who perished with his eyes and heart focused on eight-year-old Franklin, six-year-old Alice, and four-year-old Frederick. But Amos Humiston was far from the only man to die clutching a photograph. Denied the presence of actual kin, many dying men removed pictures from pockets or knapsacks and spent their last moments communicating with these representations of absent loved ones. "I have often thought," William Stilwell wrote to his wife, Molly,



*Amos Humiston dies holding an ambrotype of his three children.
"An Incident at Gettysburg." Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper,
January 2, 1864.*

in Georgia, "if I have to die on the battlefield, if some kind friend would just lay my Bible under my head and your likeness on my breast with the golden curls of hair in it, that it would be enough."¹⁸

In military hospitals, nurses frequently cooperated in the search for substitute kin, permitting delirious soldiers to think their mothers, wives, or sisters stood nearby. In a famous lecture she delivered across the country in the years after the war, Clara Barton described her crisis of conscience when a young man on the verge of death mistook her for his sister Mary. Unable to bring herself actually to address him as "brother," she nevertheless kissed his forehead so that, as she explained, "the act had done the falsehood the lips refused to speak."¹⁹

Perhaps Clara Barton was familiar with some of the popular Civil War-era songs that portrayed her situation almost exactly: the plea

of the expiring soldier requesting his nurse to "Be My Mother Till I Die," or even the lines of the nurse herself:

*Let me kiss him for his mother,
Or perchance a sister dear;*

.....
*Farewell, dear stranger brother,
Our requiem, our tears.*

This song was so widely sung it prompted a reply, which was published as an "ANSWER TO: Let Me Kiss Him for His Mother." Written in the voice of those who remained at home, the ballad expressed gratitude to the women caring for the wounded at the same time that it sought to reassure wives and mothers that their loved ones were not dying alone.

*Bless the lips that kissed our darling,
As he lay on his death-bed,
Far from home and 'mid cold strangers
Blessings rest upon your head.*

.....
*O my darling! O our dead one!
Though you died far, far away,
You had two kind lips to kiss you,
As upon your bier you lay*

.....
*You had one to smooth your pillow,
You had one to close your eyes.²⁰*

The original song and its "answer" represented an interchange, a nationwide conversation between soldiers and civilians, between men and women, as they worked together to reconstruct the Good Death amid the disruptions of war, to maintain the traditional connections between the dying and their kin that defined the *ars moriendi*. The inability to witness the last moments of a brother, hus-

band, or child shattered expectations about an appropriate earthly conclusion to these important human connections. A father who arrived to find his son just hours after he died of wounds received at Fredericksburg wrote feelingly of his disappointment—and described his vision of how his son's life should have ended. "If I could have got to our child, and spoken loving and encouraging words to him, and held his dear hand in mine, and received his last breath: but it was not so to be." Yet denied his deathbed role, the parent had at least achieved one of his purposes: he had acquired definite knowledge of his son's fate.²¹

Because no effective or formal system of reporting casualties operated on either side during the war, it became customary for the slain soldier's closest companions at the time of his death to write a letter to his next of kin, not just offering sympathy and discussing the disposition of clothes and back pay but providing the kind of information a relative would have looked for in a conventional peacetime deathbed scene. These were condolence letters intended to offer the comfort implicit in the narratives of the *ars moriendi* that most of them contained. News of a Good Death constituted the ultimate solace—the consoling promise of life everlasting.²²

Some soldiers tried to establish formal arrangements to ensure the transmission of such information, to make sure that not just the fact but a description of their death would be communicated to their families. In 1862 Williamson D. Ward of the 39th Indiana made a pact with several members of his company to provide this assurance for one another. "We promised each other" that if any were wounded or killed, "we would see that they were assisted off the field if wounded and if dead to inform the family of the circumstances of death." In the Union prison at Fort Delaware, captured Confederate officers formed a Christian Association with a similar purpose. The group's minute book recorded their resolution, passed on January 6, 1865, "making it the duty" of the organization "to ascertain the name of every Confederate off[icer] dying in this prison and the attendant circumstances, and to transmit the same to their nearest friends or relatives."²³

But even without the formality of such resolutions, soldiers performed this obligation. After Gettysburg W. J. O'Daniel informed Sarah Torrence of the death of her husband, Leonidas, explaining that the two of them "went into battle side by side," promising each other "if one go[t] hurt to do all we could for him." The letter represented the final fulfillment of that obligation. William Fields wrote to Amanda Fitzpatrick about how her husband had passed his last hours in a Richmond hospital at the very end of the war: "As you in all probability have not heard of the death of your husband and as I was a witness to his death I consider it my duty to write to you although I am a stranger to you." Duty similarly motivated I. G. Patten of Alabama to respond with "Aufaul knuse" to a letter that arrived in camp from I. B. Cadenhead's wife almost two weeks after his battlefield death. Another Confederate castigated himself for not stopping in the aftermath of an 1863 battle to record an enemy soldier's last words and transmit them to his family. In retrospect, this seemed to the young rebel a far more egregious failure than not providing water to the thirsty man.²⁴

Remarkably similar North and South, condolence letters constitute a genre that emerged from the combination of the assumptions of *ars moriendi* with the "peculiar conditions and necessities" of the Civil War. These letters sought to make absent loved ones virtual witnesses to the dying moments they had been denied, to link home and battlefield, and to mend the fissures war had introduced into the fabric of the Good Death. In camp hospitals nurses and doctors often assumed this responsibility, sending the bereaved detailed descriptions not just of illnesses and wounds but of last moments and last words. Some hospital personnel even played the role of instructors in the art of dying, eliciting final statements and cueing their patients through the enactment of the Good Death. When Jerry Luther lay wounded in 1862, a physician urged him to send a last message to his mother. Another soldier, asked by a doctor for his last words to send home, responded by requesting the doctor to provide them. "I do not know what to say. You ought to know what I want to say. Well, tell them only just such a message as you would like to send if you were

dying." The expiring soldier clearly regarded the doctor as an expert in *ars moriendi* as well as in medicine. This was a ritual the physician must understand far better than he. The war encouraged not just the performance of the traditions of *ars moriendi* but their dissemination. Chaplains North and South saw this instruction as perhaps their most important obligation to the soldiers in their spiritual charge, a duty Catholic father William Corby described as "the sad consolation of helping them . . . to die well."²⁵

Sometimes soldiers would attempt to eliminate intermediaries and narrate their deaths directly. Many carried letters to be forwarded to loved ones if they were killed. Sergeant John Brock of the 43rd U.S. Colored Infantry described men bidding each other farewell as they awaited battle near Petersburg. "One corporal from the state of Maine," he reported, "handed me a letter, together with his money and watch. 'Write my wife,' said he, 'in case that anything should happen to me.'"²⁶

Some men managed to write home themselves as they lay dying, speaking through pens instead of from the domestic deathbeds war had denied them. These letters are particularly wrenching, in part because last words of more than a century ago appear seemingly unmediated on the page, speaking across the years, serving as a startling representation of immortality to a twenty-first-century reader. Jeremiah Gage of Mississippi wrote his mother after Gettysburg, "This is the last you may ever hear from me. I have time to tell you I died like a man."²⁷

Bloodstains cover James Robert Montgomery's 1864 letter from Spotsylvania to his father in Camden, Mississippi. A private in the Confederate signal corps, twenty-six-year-old Montgomery reported that a piece of shell had "horribly mangled" his right shoulder. "Death," he wrote, "is inevitable." But if the stained paper makes his wounds seem almost tangible, his assumptions about death emphasize the years that distance him from our own time. **"This is my last letter to you," he explains. "I write to you because I know you would be delighted to read a word from your dying son."** His choice of the word "delight" here—a term that seems strikingly inappropriate

within our modern understanding—underlines the importance accorded the words of the dying. Even as his father faced the terrible news of his son's death, Montgomery expected him to have the capacity to be delighted by the delivery of his son's last thoughts. And even in extremis Montgomery followed the generic form of the Civil War death letter. By the middle of the 1864 Wilderness campaign, Montgomery may well have had a good deal of practice at writing such letters to other families. Now he could use this proficiency in composing his own.²⁸

Montgomery died four days later. His close comrade Ethelbert Fairfax wrote to confirm his death and to describe James's last moments to his family. "I have never witnessed such an exhibition of fortitude and Christian resignation as he showed. In this sad bereavement you will have the greatest of all comforts in knowing that he had made his peace with god and was resigned to his fate . . . He retained consciousness to the last . . . His grave is marked." Marked but never found. Montgomery's family never realized their hope to bring his body home to Mississippi.²⁹

Letters describing soldiers' last moments on Earth are so similar, it is as if their authors had a checklist in mind. In fact, letter writers understood the elements of the Good Death so explicitly that they could anticipate the information the bereaved would have sought had they been present at the hour of death: the deceased had been conscious of his fate, had demonstrated willingness to accept it, had shown signs of belief in God and in his own salvation, and had left messages and instructive exhortations for those who should have been at his side. Each of these details was a kind of shorthand, conveying to the reader at home a broader set of implications about the dying man's spiritual state and embodying the assumptions most Americans shared about life and death.³⁰

Condolence letters invariably addressed the deceased's awareness of his fate. It was, of course, desirable for the dying man to be conscious and able to confront his impending demise. Only if he was facing death's inevitability would he clearly reveal the state of his soul in his last utterances. One of the Civil War's greatest horrors was that

it denied so many soldiers this opportunity by killing them suddenly, obliterating them on the battlefield and depriving them of the chance for the life-defining deathbed experience. Letter writers were honest in reporting such unsatisfactory deaths, explaining to loved ones at home that they were not alone in being deprived of the last words of the departed.

Sudden death represented a profound threat to fundamental assumptions about the correct way to die, and its frequency on the battlefield comprised one of the most important ways that Civil War death departed from the "ordinary death" of the prewar period. When two soldiers calmly eating dinner in a tent in South Carolina were instantly and unexpectedly killed by a shell lobbed from nearby Sullivan's Island, Samuel A. Valentine of the legendary Massachusetts 54th wrote that although he had seen many comrades die, this incident was especially upsetting, and he declared that he had "never had anything to rest on me so much in my life." The suddenness, the lack of preparation, made these deaths a particularly "awful sight."³¹

Readiness was so important in determining the goodness of a death that soldiers often tried to convince themselves and others that even what appeared to be sudden had in fact been well prepared. The soldier unable to speak after being wounded on the field had, letter writers frequently reassured kin, expressed his faith and demonstrated his anticipations of salvation in the days or weeks before his fatal encounter. When John L. Mason was killed just outside Richmond in October 1864, a comrade wrote to his mother to explain he "died almost instantly without speaking or uttering a word after being struck." But the letter went on to assure her that there still remained "much for consolation" in his death, for even though Mason had been unable to say so, there was evidence that he was "willing and ready to meet his saviour." The preceding summer he had told his comrades that he "felt his sins were forgiven & that he was ready and resigned to the Lord's will & while talking he was so much overjoyed that he could hardly suppress his feelings of delight."³²

A sermon delivered in honor of a deceased New York soldier gave this paradox of prepared unpreparedness theological foundation. Reverend Alexander Twombly reminded the assembled congregation that no such thing as sudden death exists in God's eyes, that the length of a human life is exactly what God intends it to be. "God's time in taking every Christian home, is the full harvest time in that soul's earthly course." Such words served as both consolation and exhortation: if God is ready, we had better be too. As an 1863 obituary discourse for a Michigan soldier admonished, "Sinner, Procrastinate not. Let his sudden death be to thee a warning."³³

An anticipated death could never be sudden, and thus soldiers' premonitions came to play an important role in their work of preparation. Many letters announcing the deaths of comrades commented on the deceased's forebodings that a particular encounter would indeed prove fatal. These men provided themselves with time for the all-important spiritual preparation one could use effectively only when face-to-face with unavoidable death. Sure knowledge—even of death—seemed preferable to persisting uncertainty, for it restored both a sense of control and the possibility for the readiness so central to the *ars moriendi*. On the night before his last battle in Virginia in 1862, Willie Bacon had told his comrades of his conviction he would die. "Strange and mysterious," remarked the preacher who delivered his funeral sermon, "is the fact that God so often permits the shadow of death to be thrown upon us, that we may prepare ourselves for his coming." L. L. Jones anticipated that he would be killed in the fighting in Missouri in the summer of 1861 and so provided his wife with his dying sentiments before he went into combat. "I wish you to have my last words and thoughts," he wrote. "Remember me as one who always showed his worst side and who was perhaps better than he seemed. I shall hope to survive and meet you again . . . but it may not be so, and so I have expressed myself in the possible view of a fatal result." He was killed in his first battle. Early in the war W. D. Rutherford of South Carolina remarked to his fiancée upon "how we find ourselves involuntarily longing for the worst," so as simply not

to be caught unaware. Rutherford confronted three more years of such uncertainty and “longing” before he was killed in Virginia in October 1864.³⁴

Wounded or sick soldiers who knew they had not long to live were explicit about being prepared, articulating their acceptance of their fate. J. C. Cartwright wrote with sadness to inform Mr. and Mrs. L. B. Lovelace of Georgia that their son had died in April 1862 in Tennessee. But, he reassured them, “he was conscious all the time and expressed a willingness to die.” T. Fitzhugh wrote Mrs. Diggs to report the death of her beloved husband in June 1863. He lived “but a short while” after being shot by the Yankees, but “he was in his right mind at the time of his death” and “was perfectly resigned.” A nurse in a Virginia military hospital informed the mother of a deceased patient that he had been “conscious of his death and . . . not afraid but willing to die,” which she reassuringly interpreted as “reason to believe that he is better off” now than in this world of woe.³⁵

Witnesses eagerly reported soldiers’ own professions of faith and Christian conviction, for these were perhaps the most persuasive evidences that could be provided of future salvation. As T. J. Hodnett exclaimed to his family at home after his brother John’s 1863 death from smallpox, “Oh how could I of Stud it if it had not bin for the bright evidence that he left that he was going to a better world.” Hodnett was deeply grateful that John’s “Sole seme to be . . . happy” as he passed his last moments singing of a heaven with “no more triels and trubble nor pane nor death.” Captain A. K. Simonton of North Carolina and Isaac Tucker of New Jersey fought on different sides of the conflict, but both died with the words “My God! My God!” on their lips. Tucker was not a “professed and decided follower of Jesus,” but his regular attendance at church, his calm in the face of death, and his invocation of the divinity at the end suggested grounds for fervent hope about his eternal future. Simonton’s presentiment of his end, his attention in the weeks before his death to “arranging his business for both worlds,” indicated that he too was ready to greet his maker, as he indeed did with his last words.³⁶

When soldiers expired unwitnessed and unattended, those report-



"The Letter Home." Charcoal and graphite drawing by Eastman Johnson, 1867. Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

ing their deaths often tried to read their bodies for signs that would reveal the nature of their last moments—to make their silence somehow speak. Their physical appearance would communicate what they had not had the opportunity to put into words. Many observers believed, as one war correspondent put it, that the "last life-expression of the countenance" was somehow "stereotyped by the death blow" and preserved for later scrutiny and analysis. A witness to the death of Maxcy Gregg wrote to the general's sisters that "the calm repose of his countenance indicated the departure of one, at peace with God." In words meant to offer similar assurance to grieving relatives, a Confederate soldier reported the death of a cousin in 1863: "His brow was perfectly calm. No scowl disfigured his happy face, which signifies he died an easy death, no sins of this world to harrow his soul as it gently passed away to distant and far happier realms." Clearly such a face could not be on its way to hell. A Michigan soldier, however, found just such evidence in the appearance of

some "rebels" already many hours dead. "Even in death," he wrote, "their traits show how desperate they are and in what situation their conscience was. Our dead look much more peaceful." Witnesses eagerly reported any evidence of painless death, not just to relieve the minds of loved ones about the suffering a soldier might have had to endure but, more importantly, because an easy death suggested the calmness, resignation, and quick passage to heaven that the bereaved so eagerly hoped for as they contemplated the fate of their lost kin.³⁷

Peaceful acceptance of God's will, even when it brought death, was an important sign of one's spiritual condition. But if resignation was necessary for salvation, it was not sufficient. Condolence letters detailed evidence of sanctified behavior that absent relatives had not been able to witness. When Henry Bobo, a Mississippi private, died of wounds received near Richmond in the summer of 1862, his cousin wrote from the field to assure Henry's parents that their son had a better chance of getting to heaven than they might think. There had been, he reported, a "great change" in Henry's "way of living" in the months just before his death. Although he had never actually become a professed Christian, Henry had quit swearing and had begun to lead a Christian life. I. B. Cadenhead's sergeant tried similarly to reassure the soldier's widow after her husband's death outside Atlanta in the summer of 1864. "I have had several conversations with him upon the subject of death he sayed to me their was one thing that he was sorry for & that [was] he had not united himself with the church before he left home." When Asahel Nash was killed in the fall of 1862, his parents wrote their nephews, who had served in the First Ohio with their son, to secure information about his life as well as his death. "We want you to write all you can about Asahel... How were his morals?" The army, they feared, was "a poor place to improve good habits."³⁸

Perhaps Walter Perry had succumbed to the temptations of camp life, for his brother Frank reported that the soldier expressed great anxiety about his past behavior as he lay dying after Antietam. Frank wrote his family in Georgia that Walter at first "said that he hoped he

was prepared to meet his God in a better world than this," but he knew "he had been a bad, bad, very bad boy." Frank hastened to assure the dying man that Christ had come to save such sinners. And when Walter failed to mention any of the family by name in his last hours, Frank emphasized that he had nonetheless addressed them implicitly by repeating "Good by, *Good by to you all.*" Striving to fit his brother's life and words into the model of the Good Death, Frank Perry consoled his family with a report of Walter's expressed hope to "meet us all in Heaven." But hope in this case seemed to fall considerably short of certainty.³⁹

In a letter to his wife informing her of her brother George's death in 1864, Frank Batchelor worked hard to transform the deceased into a plausible candidate for salvation. Batchelor admitted that George "did not belong to the visible body of Christ's Church," but cited his "charity," "his strong belief in the Bible," and his rejection of the sins of "envy hatred and malice" to offer his wife hope for her brother's fate. Batchelor confirmed himself "satisfied" that George was "a man of prayer" and had no doubt at last "found the Savior precious to his sole" before he died. "This being so," Batchelor happily concluded, his wife could comfort herself with the knowledge she would meet her brother again "in the green fields of Eden."⁴⁰

Just as the bereaved looked for persuasive evidence of salvation, so too were they eager for last messages from dying kin. Reports of parting communications to loved ones appeared in almost every condolence letter. Sanford Branch wrote his mother in Georgia after the First Battle of Bull Run to say his brother John's last words were "about you." After Private Alfred G. Gardner of Rhode Island was shot at Gettysburg, he charged his sergeant to tell his wife he died happy. T. J. Spurr of Massachusetts expired uttering the word "Mother"; Wiley Dorman "asked for his Mother the last word he spoke." Fathers often exhorted children to complete their education, help their mothers, and say their prayers. With these words dying soldiers brought the names and spirits of absent loved ones to their deathbeds and left their survivors with wishes and instructions that outlived their source. For those at home, news of these final mes-

sages reinforced the sense of connectedness to lost kin. Neither family nor soldier was left entirely alone, for these deathbed invocations of absent loved ones worked in some measure to overcome separations. Home and battlefield collaborated in the work of managing the unprecedented realities of Civil War death.⁴¹

Soldiers' efforts to provide consolation for their survivors altered the traditions of the *ars moriendi*. New kinds of death required changed forms and meanings for consolation. When Civil War condolence letters enumerated evidence of the deceased's Christian achievements, designed to show his eligibility for salvation, the writer often included details of the soldier's military performance, his patriotism, and his manliness. "Tell my mother," one soldier said, "I have stood before the enemy fighting in a great and glorious cause." In a letter to the widow of a comrade who had died the preceding day, T. Fitzhugh reported all the customary information: her husband had been resigned to death, was conscious of his fate, and sent his love to his wife and children. But he also added that the soldier had "died a glorious death in defense of his Country."⁴²

The image of the Christian soldier encompassed patriotic duty within the realm of religious obligation. But in some instances patriotism and courage seemed to serve as a replacement for evidence of deep religious faith. After Ball's Bluff, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. lay severely wounded, wondering if his religious skepticism was going to put him "en route for Hell." A "deathbed recantation," he believed, would be "but a cowardly giving way to fear." With willful profanity, he declared, "I'll be G-d'd if I know where I'm going." But he urged his physician to write home in case of his death to say that he had done his duty. "I was very anxious they should know that."⁴³

Holmes's worried acknowledgment of his failure to conform to expected belief and behavior ironically affirms the cultural power of the prevailing Christian narrative. Some nonbelievers hoped that patriotism would substitute for religious conviction in ensuring eternal life. A dying Confederate asked a friend, "Johnnie if a boy dies for his country the glory is his forever isn't it?" He would have found the

views of David Cornwell of the Eighth Illinois reassuring. "I couldn't imagine," he mused, "the soul of a soldier who had died in the defense of his country being consigned to an orthodox hell, whatever his opinion might be of the plan of salvation."⁴⁴

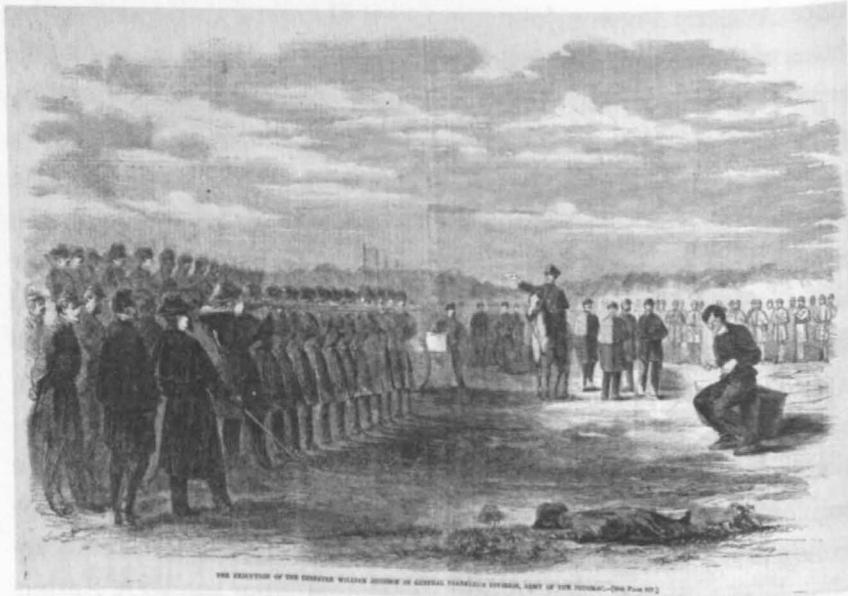
Cornwell's views, widely held in both armies, seemed to many Protestant clergy an unwarranted theological departure generated by earthly needs rather than transcendent truths. As the *Army and Navy Messenger*, published in Virginia by the interdenominational Evangelical Tract Society, warned in 1864, patriotism was not piety. "It is not the blood of man, but '*the blood of Jesus Christ that cleanseth from all sin.*'"⁴⁵

Despite clerical efforts, the boundary between duty to God and duty to country blurred, and dying bravely and manfully became an important part of dying well. For some soldiers it almost served to take the place of the more sacred obligations of holy living that had traditionally prepared the way for the Good Death. Letters comforting Wade Hampton after his son Preston was killed in the fall of 1864 emphasized this juxtaposition of military and Christian duty and sacrifice. William Preston Johnston urged Hampton to remember that his son's "heroism has culminated in martyrdom," which should serve as a "consolation for the years he might have lived." James Connor's letter to Hampton structured the imperatives of Christianity, military courage, and masculinity into a hierarchy of solace. "Your best consolation will I know my dear Genl," he wrote, "be drawn from higher than earthly sources[;] still some alleviation of the sorrow is to be drawn from the reflection that Preston died as he had lived, in the path of duty and honor. Young as he was he had played a man's part in the war."⁴⁶

Although Christian principles remained paramount, considerations of courage and honor could also offer "some alleviation of the sorrow" and thus came to play a significant role in Civil War conceptions of holy living and holy dying. A letter written from North Carolina in 1863 to inform William K. Rash that "your son R. A. Rash is no more" is striking in its deviation from the conventional model. It

includes no mention of God or religion, simply reporting the ravages of "the Grim monster Death." All the more significant, then, is its invocation of the only comfort available in the absence of appeal to the sacred: "But one consolation he died in full discharge of his duty in the defence of his home & Country." Patriotism and piety converged in what was at once a newly religious conception of the nation and a newly worldly understanding of faith.⁴⁷

For some, even the reassurance of manly duty bravely accomplished remained unavailable. Commanding officers, chaplains, nurses, and friends did all within their power to cast each death as good, to offer grounds for hope to the bereaved. As one postwar chronicler explained, the Catholic Sisters of Mercy who nursed eighteen-year-old David Brant "wrote to his father the least painful account possible of the poor son's death." Indeed, attendants of the dying may not have simply waited to report a Good Death but worked instead to compel it by demanding courage and calmness



A Bad Death. "The Execution of the Deserter William Johnson."
Harper's Weekly, December 28, 1861.

from the moribund or even, as Catholic nurses and chaplains frequently reported, winning consent for last-minute baptisms. These observers were struggling to manage and mitigate some of the horror of the slaughter they encountered daily.⁴⁸

But sometimes what one Confederate chaplain called “fond and comforting hope” was all but impossible. Hugh McLees, a missionary to South Carolina regiments, noted that “the deathbed of an impenitent and unpardoned sinner is a very awful place yet it is the one where I have been often called to stand.” To stand—but not to describe, for there was little motivation to communicate such distressing information to survivors. But depictions of Bad Deaths could serve as “edifying” examples. Reports of painful, terrifying deaths offered powerful warnings. Father Louis-Hippolyte Gache, a Confederate chaplain, found Freemasons especially likely to die badly, obstinate in rejecting faith to the end. Gache described a man who cursed both him and the church in his “last agony” and thus left his family with a “twofold bereavement: they mourned his physical, and with much more grief, his spiritual death.”⁴⁹

Perhaps the most widespread version of the Bad Death appeared in the narratives of soldiers’ executions that can be found not only in newspapers and religious publications but in almost every surviving soldier’s diary and every substantial collection of soldiers’ letters. Punishment for desertion or for crimes like murder or rape, executions were more frequent in the Civil War than in any American conflict before or since. They were rituals customarily staged before assemblies of troops and were designed to make a powerful impression and serve a distinct disciplinary purpose. The *Charleston Mercury* described soldiers seized by “uncontrollable emotion” as their division formed three sides of a square to witness the execution of ten deserters. Soldiers who sat on their coffins as they awaited the firing squad or stumbled up the steps to the gallows served as an unforgettable warning to those who would die well rather than in shame and ignominy. An execution compelled its witnesses literally to confront death and to consider the proper path toward life’s final hour. In the case of execution of deserters, the ceremony offered a particularly



pointed contrast between the Good Death in combat and the disgraceful end meted out to those seeking to escape battle's terrors.⁵⁰

Executions provided more than just negative examples. The condemned served in many cases as exemplars of hope, for chaplains worked to save these unfortunates from "the second death" and to use them to transmit a compelling educational message. Calm resignation, last-minute expressions of repentance, the enactment of elements of the Good Death even at the foot of the gallows, sometimes even an address from the prisoner urging his fellow soldiers to "beware of his untimely fate"—all provided indelible messages about both good living and good dying, ones that witnesses took very much to heart. These deaths, remarked Catholic chaplain William Corby, "were harder on the nervous system than the scenes witnessed in the middle of a battle, where there is rattle, dash, and excitement to nerve one up for the occasion." As a Confederate private remarked in a letter to his wife, seeing a man die this way was "awful"—at once horrible and inspiring of awe. Almost any soldier could have written the words penned by one witness to an execution in 1863: "I don't think I shall ever forget the scene."⁵¹

Military executions made a forceful statement about the need to be prepared to die. As the condemned prisoner scrambled to change his eternal fate with a last-minute conversion or repentance, he reinforced the centrality of readiness to the Good Death. Spiritual preparedness was of course the essence of dying well, but men often demonstrated readiness in more temporal ways. Many popular renditions of the *ars moriendi* emphasized the importance of settling one's worldly affairs. A man who arranged for a burial plot on a furlough home was clearly contemplating his mortality, disposing of earthly preoccupations so that his death might bring a satisfactory conclusion to life's narrative.

Many soldiers recognized their precarious situation by composing wills. "Knowing the uncertainty of life & the uncertainty of death," Private Edward Bates of Virginia proceeded to arrange for the disposition of his twenty-five dollars of personal property. David Coe of Clarke County, Virginia, composed a will at the very occasion of his

enlistment at the Berryville Post Office in June 1861. Calling for pen, ink, and paper, he conscripted postal patrons to serve as witnesses. "As I am about to leave home in these war of the Sothren Confedersey, I leave all I am worth . . . to my wife." Thomas Montfort of Georgia found it "sad and melancholy" to see men before battle "preparing for the worst by disposing of their property by will" at the same time the surgeon sharpened his instruments, soldiers readied lint for bandages, and men scattered sand around artillery emplacements, "not for health or cleanliness, but to drink up human blood." As his unit awaited a Union attack on Savannah's Fort Pulaski, Montfort passed his time "witnessing wills" for comrades.⁵²

Although the affluent were more likely to prepare wills, many soldiers of lesser means also sought to specify the distribution of their assets, perhaps to try to exert some control over a future in which they would play no part. Attendants in military hospitals often solicited oral declarations from dying soldiers in order to know what to do with their effects. John Edwards's dying wishes, recorded as his "Noncupitative Will," by Mr. Hill at the hospital of the 53rd Virginia in April 1862, requested that the forty dollars in his possession be sent to his sister because he knew he was "bound to die."⁵³

Soldiers' personal possessions often took on the character of *memento mori*, relics that retained and represented something of the spirit of the departed. Burns Newman of the Seventh Wisconsin Volunteers undertook the "painful duty" of informing Michael Shortell's father of his son's death near Petersburg the preceding evening. "Enclosed," he continued, "send you some trinkets taken from his person by my hand. Think you will prize them as keepsakes." A Bible, a watch, a diary, a lock of hair, even the bullet with which a son or a brother had been killed could help to fill the void left by the loved one's departure, and could help make tangible a loss known only through the abstractions of language.⁵⁴

In a more figurative sense, condolence letters reporting the details of soldiers' deaths served as *memento mori* for kin working to understand wartime loss. Survivors rewrote these narratives of Good Deaths using the condolence letter as a rough draft for a range of

printed genres designed to impose meaning and purpose on war's chaos and destruction. Obituaries often replicated the structure and content of condolence letters, frequently even quoting them directly, describing last moments and last words and assessing the likelihood of a deceased soldier's salvation. William James Dixon of the Sixth Regiment of South Carolina Volunteers, his obituary reported, had not entered the army as a believer, though he had always "maintained a strictly moral character." Several battles, however, impressed him with "the mercy of God in his preservation," so that before his death at Chancellorsville he had "resolved to lead a new life." His loved ones could, the *Daily South Carolinian* assured them, safely "mourn not as those who have no hope" and could be certain "that their loss is his eternal gain."⁵⁵

Civil War Americans worked to construct Good Deaths for themselves and their comrades amid the conditions that made dying—and living—so terrible. As war continued inexorably onward and as death tolls mounted ever higher, soldiers on both sides reported how difficult it became to believe that the slaughter was purposeful and that their sacrifices had meaning. Yet the narratives of the *ars moriendi* continued to exert their power, as soldiers wrote home about comrades' deaths in letters that resisted and reframed war's carnage.

Men did so not simply to mislead the bereaved in order to ease their pain—a ruse that historian Jay Winter attributes to the self-consciously deceptive letters from the Western Front in World War I. As Roland Bowen of the 15th Massachusetts responded to a friend's request for "all the particulars" about a comrade's death at Antietam, "I fear they will do you no good and that you will be more mortified [devastated] after the facts are told than you are now. Still you ask it and wither it be for the better or worse not a word shall be [kept] from you."⁵⁶

Although the authors of Civil War condolence letters did try their utmost to cast the deaths they described in the best possible light, their efforts are striking in their apparent commitment to honesty,

their scrupulousness in reporting when a deceased soldier's faith had been suffused with doubt, when his behavior had been less than saintly. Civil War soldiers seem themselves desperately to have wanted to believe in the narratives they told and in the religious assumptions that lay behind them. The letters may have served in part as a way of reaching across the chasm of experience and horror that separated battle and home front, as an almost ritualized affirmation of those very domestic understandings of death that had been so profoundly challenged by circumstances of war, as a way of moving symbolically out of the meaningless slaughter back into the reassuring mid-nineteenth-century assumptions about life's meaning and purpose. Narratives of dying well may have served as a kind of life-line between the new world of battle and the old world at home.⁵⁷

In the eyes of a modern reader, men often seem to have been trying too hard as they sought to present evidence of a dead comrade's ease at dying or readiness for salvation. But their apparent struggle provides perhaps the most eloquent testimony of how important it was for them to try to maintain the comforting assumptions about death and its meaning with which they had begun the war. In face of the profound upheaval and chaos that civil war brought to their society and to their own individual lives, Americans North and South held tenaciously to deeply rooted beliefs that would enable them to make sense out of a slaughter that was almost unbearable. Their Victorian and Christian culture offered them the resources with which to salve these deep spiritual wounds. Ideas and beliefs worked to assuage, even to overcome the physical devastation of battle. And yet death ultimately remained, as it must, unintelligible, a "riddle," as Herman Melville wrote, "of which the slain / Sole solvers are."⁵⁸ Narratives of the Good Death could not annul the killing that war required. Nor could they erase the unforgettable scenes of battlefield carnage that made soldiers question both the humanity of those slaughtered like animals and the humanity of those who had wreaked such devastation.