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Abstract

“To think of the subject unmans me:’ An Exploration of Grief and Soldiering Through the Letters of Henry Livermore Abbott,” explores the challenges to both the Victorian ideals of manliness and the culture of death presented by the American Civil War. The letters of Henry Abbott, a young officer serving with the 20th Massachusetts, display the tension between his upper class New England world in which gentleman were to operate within an ideal of emotional control and sentimentality, and his new existence on the ground level of the Army of the Potomac. After the death of his brother, this tension initially caused him to suppress his grief for fear of being “unmanned” in front of his fellow soldiers. Eventually, Abbott found a different and more acceptable way to display emotion through mourning the deaths of fellow soldiers in his regiment as surrogates for his brother’s death. Over time, Abbott’s comrades became much more than stand-ins for his family. He truly began to conceive of the men he fought and suffered with from the beginning of the war in brotherly terms, and this allowed him to create a space in which he was comfortable openly grieving. Abbott’s use of surrogates both for his family and for the idealized “Good Death” allowed him to salvage his ideological foundations and apply them to a new world of carnage and violence.

Keywords

American Civil War, 20th Massachusetts, Henry Abbott, Army of the Potomac, Grief, Soldiering, Masculinity, Good Death

“To Think of the Subject Unmans Me:” An Exploration of Grief and Soldiering Through
the Letters of Henry Livermore Abbott
By Rebekah Oakes

On August 9, 1862, twenty year old Henry Livermore Abbott suffered a great personal tragedy; the death of his beloved older brother, Ned. This was not only the death of a sibling, but the loss of a comrade killed in battle. Abbott was trapped between his upper class New England world in which gentleman were to operate within an ideal of emotional control and sentimentality, and his new existence on the ground level of the Army of the Potomac. He was conflicted over how to properly grieve for his brother within the confines of the Victorian culture of death, while still presenting the “coolness” and manliness expected of an officer and a gentleman. This tension initially caused him to suppress his grief for fear of being “unmanned” in front of his fellow soldiers.¹ Eventually, Abbott found a different and more acceptable way to display emotion through mourning the deaths of fellow soldiers in his regiment as surrogates for his brother’s death. Over time, Abbott’s comrades became much more than stand-ins for his family. He truly began to conceive of the men he fought and suffered with from the beginning of the war in brotherly terms, and this allowed him to create a space in which he was comfortable openly grieving.²

With the death of his brother, Abbott faced major challenges the Civil War presented to northern Victorian society in the realms of both grieving and masculinity. The first of these was how Union soldiers, particularly officers such as Abbott, were to represent the complicated and deeply engrained antebellum ideals of manliness.

¹ Henry Livermore Abbott, *Fallen Leaves: The Civil War Letters of Major Henry Livermore Abbott*, ed. Robert Garth Scott (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1991), 140.

² For significant secondary literature concerning the use of comrades as substitutes for family during war, see James McPherson’s *For Cause & Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* and Reid Mitchell’s *The Vacant Chair: The Northern Soldier Leaves Home*.

Although many different expressions of manhood existed, society at this time dictated that men display both emotional control and some level of sentimentality. Also emphasized in the Victorian cult of masculinity were the concepts of honor, duty to family and community, and personal courage. The horrors of war both challenged these ideals and at times made them difficult to uphold.³ Even harder to maintain were the strict rules surrounding death and grieving integral to Victorian culture. Northerners at this time observed a deeply engrained culture surrounding death, which emphasized the importance of preparation for death, familial witnesses to death, and last rites and rituals. Collectively, this was known as the “Good Death.”⁴ Carnage on a massive and anonymous scale made the practices surrounding ‘ideal’ death impossible without adaptation.

The attempt to uphold these two ideals, which at times contradicted one another, weighed heavily on the minds of soldiers like Henry Abbott. The letters Abbott wrote to his family, fellow soldiers, and families of soldiers killed in battle until his own death in 1864 demonstrated how one young, elite officer from New England shifted his deeply ingrained cultural standards to fit the reality of his everyday situations during war. As Abbott progressed on his personal journey from new recruit to experienced veteran, he was able to grieve more openly while still maintaining his manhood. Abbott’s correspondence revealed that although the ideals of manliness and grief remained

³ For a more extensive treatment of the expectations of men in Victorian society, see Amy S. Greenberg’s *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* and E. Anthony Rotundo’s *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era*. For more on the tensions between Northern soldiers’ duty to home and duty to country, see Reid Mitchell’s *The Vacant Chair: The Northern Soldier Leaves Home*. Secondary literature citing the importance of emotional control and personal courage for Civil War soldiers includes Gerald F. Linderman’s *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* and Lorien Foote’s *The Gentleman and the Roughs: Manhood, Honor, and Violence in the Union Army*.

⁴ For extensive treatment of the “Good Death” and the challenges to Victorian grieving culture presented by the Civil War, see Drew Gilpin Faust’s *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*.

surprisingly consistent throughout the war, the way soldiers were able to apply those ideals changed significantly.

Henry Abbott, the third of eleven children, was born to a wealthy, politically active family on July 21, 1842 in Lowell, Massachusetts. His father, Josiah Gardner Abbott, was a successful lawyer and influential member of the Northern Democratic Party, and the family belonged to a segment of Massachusetts society known as the “Boston Aristocracy.”⁵ At the age of fourteen, young Henry began his career at Harvard, an institution which at this time was just as concerned with teaching boys how to be gentlemen as it was with providing them with an education. Harvard in the mid-19th century was described as being “a world dominated by traditions of oppressive stuffiness and organized with the authoritarian energy suitable for a reform school for the young, but already morally delinquent gentleman.” The administration was known to be formal, overbearing, and even puritanical, and Henry, like many of the other students, rebelled.⁶ In a letter to his aunt, he explained that he found Harvard life, with its required chapel attendance and micromanaged schedules, to be “irksome.” He was consistently rebuked for vices such as “indecorum at prayers” and “tardiness at recitations,” and was twice suspended. However, he managed to keep up with his studies enough to graduate near the middle of his class in 1860. A brief stint studying law under his father’s tutelage was interrupted with the onset of war and the subsequent call for troops in April of 1861.⁷

From the outset of the war, Abbott began his struggle with the perceived ideals of manliness. Two of his brothers, one older and one younger, almost immediately

⁵ Abbott, *Fallen Leaves*, 1-2.

⁶ Richard F. Miller, *Harvard’s Civil War: A History of the Twentieth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2005), 18.

⁷ Abbott, *Fallen Leaves*, 2-3.

accepted officer positions with the 2nd Massachusetts, swept up with the patriotic fervor seizing the imaginations of many young men at the time.⁸ Abbott, however, was less enthusiastic, admitting in a letter to his father in May of 1861 that his “tastes are not warlike like Ned & Fletcher’s, but literary & domestic.”⁹ Despite this view, the 1860s was a time when many varying and sometimes contradictory views on manliness existed, none of which would allow Abbott to remain passive while other men were offering their service to the nation. In *Manifest Manhood*, Amy Greenberg explained that the middle of the nineteenth century was a time of conflict between two extremely influential ideals of manhood; the *restrained man* and the *martial man*. Restrained manhood emphasized familial ties, the practice of a strong Protestant faith, expertise, and success in business. The word “restrained,” was not synonymous with weak or feminine; in contrast, “restrained men” valued bravery just as much as other characteristics such as moral fortitude and reliability. Martial manhood, in contrast, valued physical strength, aggression, and the ability to dominate others. Although most men exhibited characteristics of both categories, the influence of restrained manhood can be seen clearly in Henry Abbott.¹⁰ He admitted to not having a great enthusiasm for war, and even described himself in a letter to his father as being “constitutionally timid.” However, he then goes on to defend this seeming flaw by writing, “But history shows a great many men who have conquered that kind of thing, & when I look back I don’t see any instance where I have displayed a want of physical courage where it was absolutely

⁸ Abbott, 3.

⁹ Abbott, 32.

¹⁰ Amy S. Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 11-14.

necessary.”¹¹ This idea of restrained manhood was one factor that drove Abbott to enlist, despite his overall lack of zeal for war and violence.

Other factors influencing Abbott’s decision to go to war were inextricably tied into the rise of the Northern middle class. The first, older influence was the idea of “communal manhood,” which was a concept developed in colonial New England and passed down through the generations. This model dictated that manhood was connected to duties to the community, and the fulfillment of these duties was through public service. For boys coming of age in the antebellum era, the ideas of being a man, a soldier, and a citizen were linked. At times, the demands placed on men to defend their homes and families through military action were contradictory to the emotional ties they felt toward their family.¹² Abbott expressed this tension in a letter to his father; while describing his distress at having to part from his mother, he went on to write, “But of course painful as such things are, they are not consideration enough to keep a man from doing what he has made up his mind to do his duty.”¹³ This sense of duty was not only to the nation, but to his family and community as well, and Abbott was typical of the time period in that he believed he was best able to serve the interests of his family by serving the nation.

Another concept which swayed Abbott’s decision to enlist was that of the “self-made man.” Proponents of this idea, which emerged in the nineteenth century alongside a republican form of government, the market economy, and the growth of the middle class, believed that manhood was based on individual interests, personal achievements,

¹¹ Abbott, *Fallen Leaves*, 32.

¹² E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 2; Reid Mitchell, *The Vacant Chair: The Northern Soldier Leaves Home* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 4,12.

¹³ Abbott, *Fallen Leaves*, 31-32.

and that the key to this was not to limit passions but channel them appropriately. This idea complimented the search of many young men to become “heroic individuals” during the antebellum era.¹⁴ Abbott expressed some concerns over the idea of personal achievement when he wrote to his mother that he “felt that I had never done any thing or amounted to any thing in the whole course of my existence...And what is more, that seemed to be the opinion of every body else.” He went on to admit his disgust with himself over this matter, and “resolved if I couldn’t do much, to do what so many other young men were doing...”¹⁵ What other young men were “doing” was enlisting in the army to fulfill their duty to community and nation. Abbott’s desire to prove himself as an individual was clear from this admission, and his commitment to this concept of personal success only deepened throughout the course of the war.

Initially, Abbott enlisted not with his brothers in the army, but with the Fourth Battalion of Infantry, a citizen’s militia assigned to Fort Independence and tasked with defending Boston Harbor from a possible attack. George Gordon, the Fourth Battalion’s West Point-trained commander, believed the purpose of the fort was to produce a “small body of well-instructed gentlemen” that would be able to lead the “undisciplined mobs of raw militia.” The men themselves, however, were concerned that their choice to remain at the fort would “be constructed as indicative of their desire to play the gentleman soldier and an unwillingness to be called into the field.”¹⁶ Although life in the fort could be enjoyable, and provided the young men with a sense of personal responsibility they did not have at Harvard, Abbott quickly grew dissatisfied. As many of his fellow gentlemen left the fort for active duty, among them Abbott’s close friend

¹⁴ Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 3; Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood*, 3.

¹⁵ Abbott, *Fallen Leaves*, 34.

¹⁶ Miller, *Harvard’s Civil War*, 16-18; *Boston Daily Advertiser*, May 2, 1861.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., his determination to find a commission in the army grew. Abbott's father, already having two sons in the army, expressed concern with sending a third, feeling that "two are enough to be shot out of one family." Josiah Abbott also seemed to doubt his second eldest son's capabilities when he described him as a "mamma's boy," and indicated that he might be better off on garrisoning duty than in active service. His father's derision, combined with Abbott's ingrained sense of duty, only strengthened his resolve to find a commission. That commission came on July 10, 1861, when Henry Abbott became a second lieutenant in Company I of the 20th Massachusetts.¹⁷

The 20th Massachusetts eventually became known by the moniker the "Harvard Regiment" because of the high number of the unit's officers that had graduated from that particular institution. This name was not reflective of the regiment as a whole. In 1861, forty-nine percent of the privates and non-commissioned officers in the 20th Massachusetts were immigrants, which was almost twice the percentage of the army as a whole. Of the thirty-nine officers, however, thirty-two were born in the United States, with twenty-eight of those born in Massachusetts. Not only were the officers leading men from diverse backgrounds that were incredibly different from their own, they were by and large drawn from white-collar professions and college students, and thus very inexperienced in matters of the military and war.¹⁸ This further strengthened the convictions of Abbott and his fellow officers to prove themselves as capable soldiers. According to officer handbooks such as August Kautz's *Customs of Service for Officers of the Army*, the most important quality for a young, inexperienced officer to possess

¹⁷ Miller, 18-19; Abbott, *Fallen Leaves*, 2-3.

¹⁸ Abbott, 3-4; Miller, 9, 34-35.

was courage. This guide implicitly stated that a man “cannot have his courage questioned and expect to succeed as an officer.”¹⁹ The truest test of courage was considered to be bravery in battle, and soon after joining the regiment, Abbott began to express in his letters the desire to prove himself in combat.²⁰

The first time a soldier saw battle was often marked by fear, not necessarily of death or bodily harm, but of being revealed as a coward.²¹ Abbott expressed this view in a letter to his father after his first experience in combat, during the battle of Ball’s Bluff on October 21, 1861, when he wrote “You know I told you that I didn’t believe I was physically brave. In fact, I was pretty sure I should be frightened on the field of battle, though I hoped my feelings of duty, pride & honor would keep me up.”²² In *Embattled Courage*, Gerald Linderman explained that in Victorian America, actions were thought to be “direct extension” of values, and therefore many soldiers used the terms “courage” and “manhood” interchangeably. Courage had a very narrow definition for Civil War soldiers, being simply “heroic action undertaken without fear.” Furthermore, courage was not something that was implied; instead, it had to be tested and proven.²³ Those labeled as cowards were not only publically shamed, they were often court-martialed and sometimes even executed. Since most regiments were raised locally, close ties to soldiers’ home communities within their regiment further increased pressure to be courageous. A Massachusetts soldier describing this test of courage after the battle of

¹⁹ August V. Kautz, *Customs of Service for Officers of the Army* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1866), http://www.64thill.org/drillmanuals/kautzs_customsofservice/officer/index.htm.

²⁰ Abbott, *Fallen Leaves*, 45.

²¹ Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), 66-69.

²² Abbott, *Fallen Leaves*, 74.

²³ Gerald F. Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 2-20.

First Manassas was not exaggerating when he wrote, “I knew if I flinched I was ruined.”²⁴

For officers, the pressure to remain courageous during the heat of battle was even greater. Courage was highly important to the army as a whole because it motivated the soldiers to fight and support each other on the battlefield. Therefore, important characteristics of an officer were “personal courage and a willingness to do anything he asked his men to do.”²⁵ For officers, courage was a necessary quality, but “cool” courage was ideal. Soldiers liked to talk about the “coolness” of their officers, men who “showed an absolute indifference under fire; they were those ideal officers who were perfectly brave without being aware that they were so.”²⁶ This seemed to be a lesson Abbott took to heart; during the battle of Ball’s Bluff, Henry Abbott was described by his company commander as walking calmly amongst the men, ignoring the hail of bullets, in an effort to keep their fortitude strong. The commander, Captain William F. Bartlett, wrote in a letter to his mother that “Lit. [Abbott] was as cool and brave as I knew he would be.”²⁷

Ball’s Bluff also marked Abbott’s first exposure to death on the battlefield. Although the 20th Massachusetts fought honorably and courageously, they were cut to pieces. To deal with this aspect of war, the concept of courage was used as well. Linderman maintained that courage was used by soldiers to detach from the horrors of battle, and prevent them from being “unmanned.” An ideally courageous soldier was able to insulate himself against the carnage of war by not reacting to the bloodshed.²⁸ Abbott illustrated this by largely ignoring the sight of casualties of the battle in his

²⁴ James M. McPherson, *For Cause & Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 51, 80-83, 58.

²⁵ Linderman, *Embattled Courage*, 21-35; McPherson, *For Cause & Comrades*, 53.

²⁶ Linderman, 76; Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank*, 80-81; Linderman, 20.

²⁷ Abbott, *Fallen Leaves*, 5.

²⁸ Linderman, *Embattled Courage*, 64-65.

letters, which must have been a jarring experience for him, and instead focusing on the bravery of the men and the worthiness of the Union cause. After this battle, Abbott's mood as ascertained from his letters was still very buoyant and patriotic, and could even be described as a bit blustering. His descriptions of the carnage of battle were very matter-of-fact and detail oriented, and basically consisted of a listing of the wounded men and the severity of their individual wounds. Most of his letters concentrated on recounting the infallible courage of his men, such as the following account sent to his father the day after the battle, when he optimistically stated that "the good of the action is this. It shows the pluck of our men. They followed their commanders admirably..."²⁹ In the months following his first battle, Abbott was preoccupied with the idea of being able to fight again and redeem himself from the loss he and his men suffered at Ball's Bluff, and seemed positive that Union victory was an inevitability.³⁰

At this point, Abbott was already establishing close ties to his regiment, particularly the men in his company. In a letter to his father, he described his men as "the best set of [men] that could be...desired," and admitted that his attachment to them sometimes prevented him from disciplining them in the same way as he did at the beginning of the war.³¹ He also refused a promotion to captain, despite his own very powerful ambitions to rise in rank, because the change in position would also require him to leave his company for another.³² His letters to his parents also indicated transformations in his attitude about war in general. Correspondence with his father was of a much more political and military nature, and he seemed to be embracing his role as a soldier. A few days before Ball's Bluff, Abbott wrote, "I have lost all ambition,

²⁹ Abbott, *Fallen Leaves*, 63-6.

³⁰ Abbott, 100-135.

³¹ Abbott, 52.

³² Abbott, 107.

for the present, for any thing but the military. I am now completely absorbed in that, & have no interest for any thing else.”³³ Letters to his mother, although much more personal, also indicate his contentment with army life. Although he often nostalgically mentioned home, and admitted that he missed it greatly, he also repeatedly indicated his intention not to return home until the war was over. He maintained that he was “beginning to get entirely over that feeling of homesickness.”³⁴ The early stages of Abbott’s military career were generalized by a preoccupation with courage, a growing bond with the men of his company, and an increase in patriotic fervor and martial spirit. However, Abbott’s fairly positive and hopeful view of the war was destroyed when the death that came along with battle affected him on a personal level.

The aftermath of the battle of Cedar Mountain left Henry Abbott with a very different experience with death, which would shake his convictions to their core. Although Abbott did not participate in this battle personally, it can be argued that the fighting of August 9, 1862 was the most transformative of his military career. It was during the battle of Cedar Mountain that Henry’s beloved older brother, Edward “Ned” Abbott, was killed. Abbott received the news on August 22, and in an August 24th letter to his father he expressed his shock, writing, “It came upon me with terrible force. I could hardly believe it. I thought Ned would surely come through all right.” Abbott also expressed a desire to have witnessed his brother’s death in the same letter when he wrote, “I wish to God I could have seen him on the battle field...It is very hard to think that we will never see him again. If I could only have seen his body.”³⁵ This fits in with

³³ Abbott, *Fallen Leaves*, 50.

³⁴ Abbott, 48-132, 119.

³⁵ Abbott, 136.

the common desire of upper class Victorian society to bear witness to the death of their loved ones, a key component of the “Good Death.”³⁶

Abbott’s ability to properly grieve for Ned was complicated by two factors. The first of these he outlines in a letter to his father a little under a month after Ned’s death, in which he wrote,

I have had a good many letters about Ned but I can’t answer them. To think of the subject unmans me. I have to keep it from my thoughts. Ever since the news came, the regiment has been in the most trying circumstances where it was absolutely necessary to force cheerfulness before the men as well as the officers. A man who didn’t would have been a coward & false to his trust. I know I haven’t allowed my feelings to interfere with my duties.³⁷

It is clear from this passage that Abbott felt openly grieving for his brother in the presence of his men would undermine his own masculinity, and possibly cause him to be viewed as cowardly and weak in the eyes of the regiment. This view directly contrasted the pre-war mentality of the middle class, which valued mourning as the most sincere expression of the ideal sentimentality.³⁸ Again, Abbott was feeling the tension that existed between manly duties as an officer and as a member of a family and social class, and had to attempt to answer the question of which took precedence.³⁹ This was related to the concept of being a “restrained man.” Officers from the elite saw manhood as being synonymous with self-restraint and emotional coolness, and if Henry

³⁶ Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 9.

³⁷ Abbott, *Fallen Leaves*, 139-40.

³⁸ Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), 124.

³⁹ Mitchell, *The Vacant Chair*, 12.

Abbott had come undone over the death of his brother, his reputation for emotional restraint would have been damaged.⁴⁰

The second factor that prevented Abbott from openly grieving was how the Civil War complicated the “elaborate cult of death” elite Victorian Americans had created for themselves.⁴¹ Americans at this time were much more acquainted with death than their modern counterparts, but the Civil War changed who died when, where, and under what circumstances. The widespread death that occurred during the war was not considered “ordinary death,” despite it becoming the most widely shared war experience.⁴² The pre-war culture had many assumptions about how death *should* occur, and these assumptions did not cease with the onset of war. According to the widely prevalent concept of the “Good Death,” a person’s last moments were supposed to be “witnessed, scrutinized, interpreted, narrated,” and prepared for, ideally by their family and loved ones; this was impossible for those dying in battle or in field hospitals. Death at this time was very connected to the home, and family played an integral role in the “good death.” Therefore, it was highly distressing that so many soldiers were dying away from their homes.⁴³ This fixation with bearing witness to a loved one’s death can be seen in Abbott’s letters. Many times, soldiers attempted to find substitutes for the missing pieces of their rituals, hoping to find proof that their loved ones “died well.”⁴⁴ Henry Abbott was no exception to this phenomenon, and he attempted to find substitutes for Ned’s last moments in several different ways.

⁴⁰ Lorien Foote, *The Gentleman and the Roughs: Manhood, Honor, and Violence in the Union Army* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 120.

⁴¹ Frances Clarke, *War Stories* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 2011), 9.

⁴² Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, xii-xiv.

⁴³ Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 6-10.

⁴⁴ Faust, 11.

One substitute Abbott found was by openly expressing his grief for other soldiers in his regiment who were killed in battle. Outwardly mourning for a dead comrade was an appropriate form of masculine sentimentality, because it fit with the idea of the “heroic martyr” common at the time.⁴⁵ Although Ned certainly fit into the mold of a martyr’s death, and could be easily mourned in that way by his family, Abbott felt uncomfortable expressing grief in this way since Ned fought with a different regiment, Abbott would be solitary in his pain. This was not true with the deaths of men from the 20th Massachusetts. Because the entire fighting unit shared in the grief, it was acceptable to express that sorrow in an open and honest way. This represented the moment when Abbott’s company began to transition in his mind from a band of comrades he was very fond of to a surrogate family. He habitually referred to the men killed by using very fraternal terms, and often compared their loss to the loss of his own brother. This was made easier by the fact that Civil War soldiers did not make a complete transition from civilian to military life; the fact that so many of these soldiers came from the same area meant that it was easy for them to see their fighting units as an “extension” of their communities.⁴⁶

One excellent example of Abbott using the grief of a comrade as a substitute for his brother was Abbott’s reaction to the death of Second Lt. Leander Alley, who was killed at the battle of Fredericksburg. When describing the death of this man to his father, Abbott stated, “You will know how I feel about his loss when I tell you that for a moment I felt the same pang as when I first heard of our great loss. I don’t want to say any thing more about him now, for thinking on such a subject makes a man bluer than

⁴⁵ Alice Fahs, *The Imagined Civil War: Popular Literature of the North & South 1861-1866* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 106; Clarke, *War Stories*, 28-29.

⁴⁶ Mitchell, *The Vacant Chair*, 21.

he ought to be in the presence of the enemy...”⁴⁷ This passage is significant for two reasons; first, he very clearly compared the loss of Alley to the loss of his brother by referring to “our great loss.” Second, although he indicated a concern with expressing his grief too openly, he qualifies this by adding that his concern was with expressing grief in front of the enemy, not in the presence of his men. This showed that the grief Abbott exhibited for Alley was “acceptable” grief for an officer to show. Not only does Abbott express grief for Alley immediately after his death, he continued to mention his sorrow for some time after. In January 1863, over a month after the battle of Fredericksburg, Abbott wrote to his mother that, “I miss him [Alley] every day. He was a terrible loss to the regt.”⁴⁸ He also arranged to pay for the embalming of Alley’s body, as he knew the soldier’s family could not afford it.⁴⁹ Since it could be exceedingly difficult for loved ones to find soldiers’ remains after battles, and even more difficult to transport those remains back home, this was probably a considerable help to the family.⁵⁰ In the case of Alley, Henry Abbott seemed to have done everything in his power to assure his family that he “died well.”

The tradition of soldiers writing letters to their dead comrades’ families became very prominent during the Civil War, and soldiers often described their bond with the deceased men through the use of familial terms.⁵¹ A letter written by Corporal Thomas O Nickerson, Co. D, 3rd Rhode Island, to the mother of John Bullock, a soldier in his company, provided an example of this. In the letter, written in January 1863, Nickerson says of Bullock, “he was as nice and as good hearted a young man as we had in our

⁴⁷ Abbott, *Fallen Leaves*, 149

⁴⁸ Abbott, 162.

⁴⁹ Abbott, 152.

⁵⁰ Gary Laderman, *Sacred Remains: American Attitudes toward Death, 1799-1883* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 92-98.

⁵¹ Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 14-15.

Regiment. and i do not think i would of missed one of my own Brothers anymore than i do him... he as a deedful good hearted fellow and our offesers thought every thing of him...”⁵² Abbott wrote similar letters almost compulsively after Ned’s death. The first of these was a highly emotional missive written to Leander Alley’s mother, in which he complimented Alley’s high moral character by writing that “he was as brave, resolute, and energetic, and at the same time as tender-hearted a man as I ever knew. A great deal of the superiority of Co. I... is due to Lieut. Alley.” He also directly compared his feelings on Alley’s death to that of Ned’s once again, lamenting that, “When I first heard of his death (I didn’t see him fall), I felt the same kind of pang as when I first heard of my brother’s death...I shall never cease to think of him with love, to my dying day.⁵³ Perhaps even more significant, Abbott wrote this letter to Alley’s mother on December 13th, the day of his death; he did not write to his own parents to inform them of his safety until one day later. A similar instance occurred after the battle of Gettysburg, when Abbott apologized to his father for not being able to give him an account of the battle because he had to write to two of his deceased comrades’ families.⁵⁴ This could show that Abbott was beginning to see his comrades as being on a level equitable to his own family.

Abbott also seemed to be more conscious of his own mortality. In a January 19, 1863 letter to his father, Abbott indicated that he expected another large and costly battle to occur soon, and closed the letter by writing, “If I don’t have the luck to come back with the army, good bye to you and all the rest...” He amended this farewell with the instructions that his father should burn the letter if news came that he survived the battle, but admitted that he wanted “to take advantage of the last chance I possibly may

⁵² Nina Silber and Mary Beth Sievens, eds, *Yankee Correspondence: Civil War Letters between New England Soldiers and the Home Front* (Charlottesville, VA: The University Press of Virginia, 1996), 28.

⁵³ Abbott, *Fallen Leaves*, 150.

⁵⁴ Abbott, *Fallen Leaves*, 186.

have to say good bye to you and all.” In this letter, Abbott also dictated that upon his death, his earnings should go to a fund established in order to help the families of those soldiers in his company who were killed or disabled.⁵⁵ In antebellum culture, a considerable amount of emphasis was placed on the last moments of life and particularly “the life-defining last words.” Those at home were often eager for messages from their dying loved ones, and it is possible that Henry Abbott was attempting to prevent his parents from having to bury another son without any idea of what his last moments contained.⁵⁶ This letter shows that Abbott took pains to provide substitutes for a “good death” for his parents in the case of his own demise.

In the months following Ned’s death, Abbott’s morale was the lowest it would be at during his military career. He was much more pessimistic, distrustful of the leadership in the army, and even angry at times. In a letter to his father after the battle of Fredericksburg, Abbott summed up the state of the army by saying, “The enthusiasm of the soldiers has been all gone for a long time. They only fight from discipline & old associations.”⁵⁷ Many of his writings at this time painted him as a loyal dissenter, believed that “The strongest peace party is the army,” and expressed his fears that the army would “disgrace itself.”⁵⁸ He began extensively discussing politics with not only his father but his mother as well, and often expressed to his mother his strong desire to return home. His ardent patriotism, excitement for vindication through battle, and faith in the Union army’s cause that he had gained after Ball’s Bluff was for the most part gone, and it was clear that he was fighting, like many other soldiers at the time, because his comrades were.

⁵⁵ Abbott, 163.

⁵⁶ Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 10, 23.

⁵⁷ Abbott, *Fallen Leaves*, 149.

⁵⁸ Abbott, 155, 162.

In March of 1863, the Abbott family faced another tragedy. On March 27th, Henry's nine year old brother Arthur died of "the croup." Abbott applied for leave on the 31st, and was able to spend about a week grieving with his family before returning to his unit on April 7th.⁵⁹ In contrast to Ned's death, Arthur's passing was not mentioned in any of Abbott's correspondence, and his little brother's name was only mentioned once more in August, when his mother sent him a photo and he commented, "Poor little fellow, one can't help feeling sad to look at it, though it is so pleasant to have it."⁶⁰ This decided difference was not because Abbott was unaffected by Arthur's death, but instead because Arthur's death was a much more "typical" death than Ned's. Arthur was a child, and Victorian America was well acquainted with the deaths of children. He also was able to die at home surrounded by his family, who were able to perform the rituals and rites of a traditional "good death."⁶¹ Abbott was also able to share his grief with his family; one of his greatest lamentations concerning Ned's death was that he wished he "were at home to talk with you both about it."⁶² It was easier for Abbott to come to terms with Arthur's death more quickly because he was able to grieve in a traditional way, without having to alter or amend his values to fit his current situation.

During the summer of 1863, Abbott began to show signs of coming to terms with his grief. He continued writing emotionally charged letters to the families of soldiers killed, but he began to write of these same men to his own family and friends as well. Perhaps the best example of this was in how Abbott described the death of Henry Ropes to his father, writing that "Poor Henry Ropes was one of the dearest friends I ever had or expected to have. He was one of the purest-minded, noblest, most generous men I ever

⁵⁹ Abbott, 173.

⁶⁰ Abbott, 196-97.

⁶¹ Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, xii, 9-11.

⁶² Abbott, *Fallen Leaves*, 140.

knew. His loss is terrible.” This letter also provided evidence of how grief for comrades was able to be more openly expressed. Abbott related to Ropes’ father that “His men actually wept when they showed me his body, ever under the tremendous cannonade,” showing that the men felt comfortable enough to express their lamentations even during the heat of battle.⁶³ In this letter, a pivotal difference can also be seen in how Abbott personally dealt with Ropes’ death in comparison with Ned’s. Instead of pushing grief for Ropes from his mind, Abbott admits that he “can’t cease to think of him.” Abbott also expressed similar sentiments to his close friend and fellow soldier, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., when he wrote to Holmes, “Henry Ropes’ loss I felt as I should a brother.”⁶⁴ This illustrated that Abbott was not only openly exhibiting these strong emotions with his family and the families of those killed, but with his fellow survivors as well.

Abbott also began to mention Ned more often in his letters, and not necessarily in conjunction with comparing his loss to that of another soldier. He would often express his renewed sorrow when something reminded him of Ned or Ned’s death, and admitted to his father once again that he “can’t think now of him lying on that field, unable to speak, & turning his eyes to the soldier that spoke to him, without being a good deal unmanned.”⁶⁵ In another significant change, Abbott began to repeatedly mention that Ned’s death was “for the best” and once stated in a letter to his younger brother Fletcher that Ned was “better off as he is.”⁶⁶ Up until this point, aside from wishing to God that he could have been there when Ned died, religion had been conspicuously absent in Abbott’s progression of grief. Overall, Abbott seemed to grow more religious as the war dragged on, transitioning from a boy who repeatedly skipped chapel at Harvard to a

⁶³ Abbott, 184.

⁶⁴ Abbott, 194.

⁶⁵ Abbott, *Fallen Leaves*, 199.

⁶⁶ Abbott, 212.

man who asked his mother to send him a prayer book, and this pattern may have proved true for his grieving process as well.⁶⁷ At this point, he may have been referring to the idea of the “heavenly country.” During the Civil War, many northern civilians were able to handle their grief by focusing their hope on an eternal reunion in heaven. Many seemed willing to accept that heaven was a better world because familial reunions occurred there, along with the absence of sin, sorrow, and sickness. This was accompanied by the pivotal idea that body and soul would be preserved in heaven, and that the family would recognize each other when reunited.⁶⁸ Abbott may have been comforted by the idea that Ned still existed on some plane of existence, and that they would meet again in the afterlife.

It is also at this point that Abbott truly emerged not only a good and valued officer, but an influential role model for other soldiers in the 20th Massachusetts. Abbott was rising in the ranks, having been promoted to major in October of 1863, and was at certain points in temporary control of the regiment.⁶⁹ Recognized as being one of the longest serving officers in the 20th Massachusetts, despite only being twenty-one years of age, he was looked upon as an example to less experienced officers. Sumner Paine, a promising seventeen year old lieutenant killed at Gettysburg, often spoke of Abbott in glowing terms, such as in the following letter to his father: “Company I is the best drilled company in the regiment, and Captain Abbott is the best officer this regiment has ever

⁶⁷ Abbott, 78.

⁶⁸ Sean A Scott, “Earth Has No Sorrow That Heaven Cannot Cure”: Northern Civilian Perspectives on Death and Eternity During the Civil War” *Journal of Social History* (Summer 2008): 845-855; Mark S. Shantz, *Awaiting the Heavenly Country: The Civil War and America’s Culture of Death* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 38-40.

⁶⁹ Abbott, *Fallen Leaves*, 223-24.

had. He could handle a brigade better than half the Brigadier Generals in the service.”⁷⁰ The success and strong reputation of the 20th Massachusetts reflected on Abbott as its even temporary commander, and earned him recognition from generals such as Gibbon and Meade. In the last few months of his life, Abbott grew into himself and his role as officer. Abbott’s transformation in his personal views on war are perhaps the most extreme change in ideals he went through, for in September of 1863, in a letter to his mother, he described himself as being “naturally of a warlike & ferocious, & not of a domestic turn,” a direct contrast to how he saw himself at the beginning of the war.⁷¹

Abbott’s feelings about his comrades had fully transitioned from fighting unit to pseudo-familial unit. He expressed the deep feelings he had for his fellow soldiers in this letter to his father: “Before the war, one could scarcely feel the same for a companion, untried as those friends since made have been by the scorching ordeal of this war, which discloses all the noblest qualities of the noblest men.”⁷² Even when given the opportunity for great personal gain, Abbott refused to leave his regiment; he refused both an offer to advance to lieutenant colonel of another regiment, and an offer of leave to see his family, in order to stay with the regiment he believed needed him.⁷³ It was possible that Abbott and the 20th Massachusetts were experiencing the phenomenon of “small-unit” or “primary group” cohesion. This was the bond soldiers formed with those closest to them, particularly with their companies and regiments, and the dependence they had on their fellow soldiers in order to fight. The members of the primary group were thought of as “brothers,” often referred to as such, and the unit itself served the

⁷⁰ Paine, Sumner. “Civil War Correspondence of Lt. Sumner Paine.” <http://people.virginia.edu/~mmd5f/paineletters.htm>

⁷¹ Abbott, *Fallen Leaves*, 217.

⁷² Abbott, *Fallen Leaves*, 223.

⁷³ Abbott, 208-09.

purpose of a surrogate family. There was nothing short of love amongst veterans who fought together for extended periods of time, and leaving the unit would be the same as leaving family. Loyalty to members of the primary group did not end with the end of life; to leave or betray the primary group would be the same as dishonoring the dead.⁷⁴ This cohesion extended far beyond the battlefield, and the close bond of Abbott's surrogate family allowed him to create a space where he felt comfortable openly expressing his emotions away from his home.

Abbott's usage of surrogates in his grief for his brother culminated in September of 1863, upon his visit to the Cedar Mountain battlefield. Significant preparation went into this visit, and Abbott made sure he was accompanied by a guide, so as to stand as close as possible to the location of his brother's death.⁷⁵ After his visit to Cedar Mountain, he sent an extremely descriptive letter to his parents detailing the experience, as well as how he imagined his brother's final moments. He wrote that "Ned advances through the field, where he is met by a heavy fire from the front and the bushes on his right, driving him back with tremendous loss, & it is back on the edge of the wood that he is at last hit." He then openly expressed anger and frustration with Ned's death, writing that, "When I look at the place, I think he was murdered...Think of that noble life lost by the heartless vanity of the politician who wishes to have the newspapers say that he advanced &c..."⁷⁶ Abbott was fixated on the idea of seeing the spot where Ned was killed because that was the closest he would be able to come to witnessing his brother's last moments. By sharing this experience with his parents in detail, the Abbott family found the best means for giving Ned a "good death" given the situation. This was

⁷⁴ Mitchell, *The Vacant Chair*, 158-59; McPherson, *For Cause & Comrades*, 85-87.

⁷⁵ Abbott, *Fallen Leaves*, 206.

⁷⁶ Abbott, 217.

only possible because Abbott felt comfortable enough with his surrogate family, his fighting unit, to allow himself to visit the old battlefield and come to terms with his grief.

May 6, 1864 was Henry's Abbott's little brother Frank's twelfth birthday. It was also the last day of Henry Abbott's life. During the ferocious battle of the Wilderness, the 20th Massachusetts once again found themselves in the thick of the worst fighting, and once again proved themselves worthy of their reputation by consenting to do the impossible.⁷⁷ As the Harvard Regiment headed directly into the fray at the Brock Road-Plank Road intersection after being asked to make an unreasonable advance, the face of Henry Livermore Abbott was spotted by Colonel Theodore Lyman, a member of Meade's staff. Lyman recounted the impression the young major made in the following way: "Abbot smiled and waved his sword towards me, as he rode by, and I called out to him wishing him good luck." The sight of Abbott cheerfully leading his men into battle would remain with Lyman for the rest of his life, and he would forever remember him as "a man who could ride into the fight with a smile on his face."⁷⁸ Henry Abbott died the epitome of the cool, restrained man. John Perry, the assistant surgeon of the 20th, remembered him as "an ideal man; an ideal officer, revered by his friends and deeply respected by all who knew him. What will become of the Twentieth without him I cannot imagine; for he was its life, its discipline, and its success."⁷⁹ Abbott was remembered not only as a heroic martyr, but as a shining example of the coolness and masculinity he struggled with emulating throughout the war

Henry Abbott's death itself fit into the pattern of grief he displayed during his life; his comrades mourned him in a very similar way to how he mourned his comrades.

⁷⁷ Miller, *Harvard's Civil War*, 336-37.

⁷⁸ Abbott, *Fallen Leaves*, 250-51.

⁷⁹ Abbott, 253.

Although it is unknown whether or not any of Abbott's comrades wrote to his parents after his death, the tale of their son's heroic demise almost certainly reached the Abbott family. One example of an attempt at a good death does survive in the official report of General Winfield S. Hancock, Abbott's corps commander, when he referred to Abbott as "a brilliant young officer," and praised him for "his courageous conduct in action, the high state of discipline in his regiment," and "his devotion to duty."⁸⁰ Reports such as these would assure Abbott's loved ones that he died 'well.' Thirty years after Abbott's death, the event was still on the minds of his men. A man named Donnelly, a corporal under Abbott's command, reflected on the moment of Abbott's death by writing, "I had learned to love and admire him. The tears welled up in my eyes at the time, even through such an appalling scene...His death was universally regretted."⁸¹ Similarly, in a Memorial Day address years later, Abbott's close friend Oliver Wendell Holmes emotionally regretted his death in very familial terms: "He was little more than a boy, but the grizzled corps commanders knew and admired him; and for us, who not only admired, but loved, his death seemed to end a portion of our life also."⁸² Finally, Frank Bartlett mourns Abbott in a way very similar to how Abbott mourned his own brother; a way in which a family member would lament the denial of a "good death." In a letter to his mother, Bartlett exclaimed, "Oh! If I only could have seen him!"⁸³

Historian Steven E. Woodworth aptly observed that "Indeed, one of the most remarkable aspects of the Civil War may be how little it changed, rather than how

⁸⁰ Miller, *Harvard's Civil War*, 342.

⁸¹ Miller, 342.

⁸² Miller, 40-41.

⁸³ Miller, 342.

much.”⁸⁴ To some extent, this is true in the case of Henry Abbott. Throughout his three years of soldiering, Henry Abbott’s overall views on grief and death, or his ideals concerning manliness, changed very little. The true change occurred in how these ideals were implemented. Through his use of surrogates for both his family and the creation of the “good death,” Abbott was able not only to grieve for his brother, but also come to terms with the stresses the Civil War placed on his ingrained ideological world. By finding avenues through which the implementation of his traditional views on manliness and death could be altered, Abbott was able to salvage his ideological foundations and apply them to a new world of carnage and violence, even when that world threatened to tear those foundations apart.

⁸⁴ Steven E. Woodworth, *While God Is Marching On: The Religious World of Civil War Soldiers* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 292.

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