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Tales from a Boston Customs House: “Worthy” Suffering

S. Marianne Johnson
Gettysburg College

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Tales from a Boston Customs House: “Worthy” Suffering

Abstract

Despite Francis Clarke’s argument that men who suffered in exceptional ways, such as amputees, were regarded as national martyrs and held up as the emblem of sacrifice to the nation, this argument cannot be applied wholesale to all exceptional sufferers in the post-war North. Although men who lost limbs in battle were often remembered in terms of glory and treated as national heroes, those who suffered in non-heroic ways, such as prisoners of war and the victims of non-combat related accidents, were often treated as less deserving of honor. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, Civil War Medicine, Amputation, USS Rhode Island, US Navy, Veterans, Civil War Memory, Suffering

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Tales from a Boston Customs House: “Worthy” Suffering

February 14, 2014

By: Sarah Johnson, '15

Despite Francis Clarke's argument that men who suffered in exceptional ways, such as amputees, were regarded as national martyrs and held up as the emblem of sacrifice to the nation, this argument cannot be applied wholesale to all exceptional sufferers in the post-war North. Although men who lost limbs in battle were often remembered in terms of glory and treated as national heroes, those who suffered in non-heroic ways, such as prisoners of war and the victims of non-combat related accidents, were often treated as less deserving of honor.

Brian Matthew Jordan, discussing amputees, argued that the empty sleeve of the veteran itself embodied the idea that he has termed the Won Cause, a counterpart to the Lost Cause tradition. Within the Won Cause, veterans had not lost their arms, but instead sacrificed them for a just cause. The sight of a pinned-up sleeve noted the bearer's integral role in a moral cause. And yet, the way in which a veteran suffered might shift the way he was perceived in society.



Writing about prisoners of war, Jordan argued that only a few years after the war, prisoner narratives were published less and less in favor of the glorious tales of battle and sacrifice. The non-heroic suffering of prisoners of war was deemed less worthy of publication and recognition, as if their sacrifice was of lesser value. Similarly, men who were injured in accidents away from the fields of glory may have been looked down

upon for not being “heroic.” Some would even lie about the circumstances in which they sustained their wounds or others would lie for them.

This background makes the case of Lewis Horton quite interesting. In the 1890s, years after prison narratives were deemed less worthy of publication, newspapers were publishing Horton's account of being shackled and paraded before Charleston citizens and locked up in a hobnail-ridden building for fugitive slaves in addition to be mistreated by the prison commandant. In regards to his wounding, Horton was always very clear that his injuries had been sustained because of a gunnery accident in which the gun fired prematurely and Horton was blown into the water with both arms shot off at the elbow. The ship was not in combat at the time, it was merely firing a salute. Newspapers picking up on Horton's story acknowledged that he was not injured in combat, and yet, he continued to be treated as a noble hero. One even explicitly addresses the issue: "Though there was nothing heroic in the way he lost his arms, that detracts nothing from the indomitable will and fearlessness of the man."

So how is it that Horton, as both a prisoner of war and a victim of a non-combat accident, was judged to have suffered and sacrificed in a "worthy" manner while the experiences of others in similar situations were not? The most probable answer is because of Horton's pre- and post-injury life. Winning the Medal of Honor for rescuing the crew of the sinking Monitor a year earlier and his incredible rehabilitation, teaching himself to write with his mouth and continue to race his yacht, do a lot to convince the reader of his "indomitable will."

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Image:

"Andersonville Prison, Camp Sumter, Ga., as it appeared August 1st 1864 when it contained 35,000 prisoners of war." Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Online. Digital ID: ppmsca 10762. Reproduction Number: LC-DIG-ppmsca-10762.