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Michael C.C. Adams, *Living Hell: The Dark Side of the Civil War*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2014. Pp. xi, 292. ISBN 978-1-4214-1221-4.

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In this remarkable book, Michael Adams (Northern Kentucky Univ.) focuses on what he terms the “dark side” of the American Civil War—“its pain, heartbreak, and tragedy ... the vicious nature of combat, the terrible infliction of physical and mental wounds, the misery of soldiers living amid corpses, filth, and flies” (ix). The book’s eight chapters prove in pitiless detail the wisdom of Gen. William T. Sherman’s famous observation (at the 1880 Ohio State Fair): “There is many a boy here to-day who looks on war as all glory, but, boys, it is all hell” (4).

After a short opening, in which he describes how violent and unhealthy antebellum America could be, Adams turns in chapter 1, “Gone for a Soldier,” to the disillusionment felt by young men as they encountered the realities of soldiering: “Youths who have dreamed only of glory will be appalled by the reality, not only of battle, but of daily military routine, with its lowly toil, verbal and physical abuse, brutal and degrading punishments. Liquor and sexual excess lure some and disgust others. Recruits succumb to illness, not just to venereal disease and alcoholism, but such camp sicknesses as measles, mumps, and nostalgia” (11). Soldiering, in short, did not produce the glories eager recruits expected. One William Chunn of the Fortieth Georgia, for example, saw “no beauties in the preparation for the whole sale slaughter of the human race ... It is nothing but horror from beginning to end” (16).

Beset by camp diseases and desperate for home comforts, soldiers often felt as helpless as slaves, seeking release by desperate means. “When a seventeen-year-old Iowan, caught deserting Sherman’s command in November 1864, pleaded in extenuation, ‘I just wanted to see my mother,’ he was shot” (25). Adams surveys the draft riots—the worst occurred in New York City in July 1863—and the recruitment of black soldiers in the North to highlight the complexities of becoming (or refusing to become) a soldier, a fate the well-heeled could avoid by paying substitutes to serve in their stead. The *New York Times* all too readily defended a substitution system favoring those “who work with their brains—who do the planning and directing of the national industry” (29). So much for common sacrifice across the classes.

Chapter 2 takes us “On the March” in armies that were like cities on the move, with many of the same problems to solve. Sewage disposal was one. Charles Francis Adams Jr. called an army “a city without sewage,” scattering its waste and offal, plagued by flies, with horse manure and human feces “festering under a mid-summer sun” (48). Finding potable water was a special challenge, as was dealing with lice and other disease-spreading pests. Harsh conditions on the march wore men down, contributing to poor decision-making. Adams cites as one example Confederate Gen. George Pickett, who, by spring 1864, was “prematurely aged, his face bloated, eyes dull, hair lank and lifeless” (53), worn down by the strain of combat as well as hemorrhoids and dysentery.

The battlefield, which provided the ultimate test and produced the ultimate strains, is the subject of chapter 3, “Close-Order Combat.” The author provides dreadful details of fighting in the machine age and of the horrendous damage done to human bodies by projectiles of all sorts.

At Second Manassas, John Worsham, 21st Virginia, saw a single shot kill four men. A captain’s corpse remained upright after the head had been knocked off, “with a stream of blood spurting a foot or more from his neck.” The shattering of heads produced harrowing experiences for those in close proximity to the victim. In action at Fort Harrison, Virginia, 1864, Union General Edward Ripley got “dashed in the face with a hot steaming mass of something horrible,” like an unsavory warm pudding. He first thought that his own features had been blown off, as the foul detritus had temporarily blinded him to his situation. But the debris proved to be from the wrecked head of a soldier standing in front of him, blasted backward. Opening his own blouse, the general

remembered, "I threw out a mass of brains, skull, hair and blood." In another incident, Union Major Thomas Hyde found his mouth similarly stuffed involuntarily with brain matter, bone, and blood, when the smashed pulp of a private's skull smacked him full in the face. (73)

Chapter 4 concerns the gruesome job of "Clearing the Battlefield" of the dead and dying. The inadequate ambulances and improvised field hospitals in the early battles of the war never improved to a level approaching satisfactory. The number and frequency of casualties were simply overwhelming. Grievous wounds defied the resources of mid-nineteenth-century medical science. Meanwhile, swine roamed battlefields eating flesh off the corpses. "Human scavengers, stragglers and depraved civilians who robbed bodies, also degraded the fallen, and sometimes finished off their victims" (88).

No job proved worse than disposing of the dead littering the battlefields. Ironically, this involved more slaughter, as military details had to shoot herds of rogue mules and horses roaming the battlefield, along with many writhing and screaming animals mutilated by missiles. Work details burned the corpses of animals, though often they lacked the time to do a thorough job, leaving half-burned remains smoldering in decaying, stinking piles, attracting flies and scavengers. Human remains also decayed quickly, especially in hot weather at the height of campaigning season. Until orders moved the regiments on, living soldiers coexisted with the dead. Virginian David Hunter Strother, a Union staff officer, explored the field after Antietam. He noted with distaste that "our troops sat cooking, eating, jabbering, and smoking; sleeping among the corpses." (100)

Such hellish conditions wounded the minds and spirits of many troops, as Adams describes in chapter 5, "The Edge of Sanity." Combat fatigue, traumatic brain injury, and post-traumatic stress disorder are recognized conditions today, but during the Civil War they were poorly, if at all, defined and understood. Officers driven beyond their mental endurance had the option of resigning, notes Adams, but enlistees had to endure and cope however they could. Desertion brought severe reprisals by military authorities, including public whippings, beatings, even branding to deter "cowardice." Adams approvingly cites Walt Whitman's account of the "horrid sarcasm" of the execution by firing squad of William Grover, a nineteen-year-old soldier who broke and ran after having endured twelve previous battles (131). The field of adolescent psychology did not exist in the mid-nineteenth century and teenagers were treated like mature adults in their blue and gray, as if donning a uniform wrought a magical transformation.

Adams devotes chapter 6, "Deprivations and Dislocations," to the severe physical and psychological traumas of soldiers' loved ones back home. Women of little means struggled to feed their families. Some, resorting to prostitution, were arrested and imprisoned for vagrancy. As a consequence, support for the war eroded. "In extremity, women in both [North and South] ... rejected the cause. 'What do I care for patriotism?' cried out a desperate Southern woman. 'My husband is my country. What is country to me if he is killed?'" (141). The horrific, seemingly never-ending toll of the war "hung over all America a great cloud of grief that embraced all races and both genders" (149), and North and South were unified in their anguish over the endless killing.

In chapter 7, "Invasions and Violations," Adams shows how prolonged war hardened hearts on both sides and vitiated pre-Civil War codes of honor and propriety. Yankees called for the "annihilation" of the Rebels, a genocidal sentiment fully shared by many of their Southern enemies. Atrocities multiplied as the war went on, lending plausibility to dehumanizing stereotypes of the enemy. Atrocity begat atrocity.

After engaging a black regiment near Monroe, Louisiana, a Texas officer wrote: "I never saw so many dead negroes in my life. We took no prisoners, except the white officers, fourteen in number; these were lined up and shot after the negroes were finished." Nathan Bedford Forrest's cavalry allegedly carried out one of the most ferocious massacres, at Fort Pillow, Tennessee, on April 12, 1864. [After which] John Probst of the 25th Wisconsin told his sweetheart that, in fighting on May 23, 1864, "twenty-three of the rebs surrendered but the boys asked them if they remembered Fort Pillow and killed them all." (168)

Chapter 8, "State of the Union," addresses the appalling legacies of the conflict, including persistent racism. "Many people hoped that the war would purify character, bringing out qualities of comradeship, heroism, self-sacrifice, [but it] had coarsened the national identity" (195). Adams quotes Abraham Lincoln's

comment in 1863 that in war “Every foul bird comes abroad, and every dirty reptile rises up” (197). Lincoln, who fought against such debasement in hopes of a just and lasting peace, himself fell to an assassin’s bullet, yet another legacy of the hatreds the war generated.

Adams closes on an elegiac note, taking the reader to the embarkation of Theodore Roosevelt’s Rough Riders to Cuba nearly two generations later. As young men and women cheer Teddy’s troops, Adams spies a group of elderly women standing by:

The gray-haired old ladies ... showed no animation; they did not wave and cheer along with the others. They looked on sadly and kept silent. Long ago, they had waved and blown kisses to other boys, dressed in butter-nut and gray, as they went off down this same road to another, bigger war. So many had not come back; they had wasted away from disease in hospitals or taken minnie [*sic*; read “minnié”] balls, dying in agony on far distant fields. Often, their graves remained unknown. Many others who had come back did so crippled and different, distracted and with a faraway look. The girls had cried and cried then, for the boys they had lost and for the shrunken lives they themselves would lead. (218)

Michael Adams’s *Living Hell* is a compelling and salutary reminder of the frightful miseries of war. All students of the Civil War and military history in general should contemplate the lessons of war’s terrors revealed in this powerful and uncompromising book.