

Living monuments: union veteran amputees
and the embodied memory of the Civil War.

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"Living Monuments": Union Veteran Amputees and the Embodied Memory of the Civil War

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

"Living Monuments"

Union Veteran Amputees and the Embodied Memory of
the Civil War

Brian Matthew Jordan (bio)

In December 1865, a little over a year after he lost his right arm at Resaca, Cpl. Jonathan M. Allison entered one of two left-handed penmanship competitions staged for the benefit of Union veterans who lost limbs during the Civil War. Embracing his empty sleeve as honorable evidence of participation in the late war, Corporal Allison, reflecting on the meaning of his injury, declared that he was a member of a much larger fraternity of Union veteran amputees. "One legged soldiers may think I have forgotten them, but no. I do not desire to detract from their honor or praise due to them," he wrote. "We are the living monuments of the late cruel and bloody Rebellion. We now retire from fields of blood and carnage to prepare to act another part in the great 'drama' of life."¹

Allison's self-classification as a "living monument" of the Union cause was scarcely exceptional; the butter-churn peddler from Fulton, Illinois, joined hundreds of his fellow dismembered Union veterans who became both dutiful and conscious custodians of the war's historical memory.² In the postbellum [End Page 121] North, which largely lacked a war-ravaged landscape, empty sleeves and their one-legged counterparts functioned as the foremost reminders of the Civil War's enormous cost in human life and suffering.³ Because these veterans' fragmented bodies challenged closure, they provided obvious sites for remembering the war. "The vast army of your comrades who have gone through life with empty sleeves, shattered limbs and broken health," C. W. Kepler told the grizzled veterans of Crocker's Iowa Brigade in September 1898, "all stand as living testimonies of the magnitude and frightfulness of that great war."⁴ While federal veteran amputees hardly achieved dominance in the fight over the memory of the Civil War, they remain a significant thread of remembrance in post-Civil War America.⁵

Utilizing the entries generated by the two left-handed penmanship competitions, this essay examines how Union amputees consciously inserted their bodies into the national debates about sectional reunion in the initial postwar period. In doing so, this essay, contrary to the assumptions of many scholars, perceives reconciliation as a process that began gathering force at Appomattox. Only two years after the

surrender, Ohio veteran James Dalzell was parodying Blue-Gray fraternalism.

You may sing of the Blue and the Gray
And mingle their hues in your rhyme,
But the Blue that we wore in the fray [**End Page 122**]
Is covered with glory sublime
Let the traitors all go if you may
(Your heroes would punish the Head)
But never confound with Gray
The Blue, whether living or dead.⁶

Sanitized tales celebrating the war replaced reflections on the cause and costs of the war far more quickly than our existing histories may allow. An anxious public, demanding undamaged veterans, exorcised the lingering consequences of the war for its participants. In a review of Warren Lee Goss's 1867 Andersonville memoir, one periodical observed, "We do not like to read such narratives. They are too remindful of the late sorrow, and we would for our own taste discourage their publication."⁷ Having vanquished the Confederate insurgency on the battlefield, Union veterans were confounded as they were "thrust aside as of no consequence whatsoever" by northern civilians "nourish[ing] the same spirit of rebellion into life again," and "pander[ing] to the late rebels."⁸ In 1867, one Pennsylvania veteran looked forward to a day when "the surviving veterans of the war against treason and rebellion" would be "held in higher esteem than at the present."⁹

Recalling the constricted cultural space in which returning ex-soldiers told their most disquieting stories helps to reframe the two left-handed penmanship competitions as some of the first contests over the Civil War's memory. Reading their contest entries as acts of remembrance, and regarding the disabled body behind each submission as a site of memory, this essay challenges the persistent notion that Union veterans hastily abandoned their sectional identity after the war.¹⁰ The historian Lisa Marie Herschbach...

“Living Monuments”

Union Veteran Amputees and the Embodied Memory of the Civil War

BRIAN MATTHEW JORDAN

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1. Jonathan M. Allison to William Oland Bourne, Dec. 26, 1865, William Oland Bourne Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Hereafter cited as Bourne Papers.

2. Neither was the phrase “living monument” exceptional in postwar writings. “The wooden leg was no longer an unsightly object, but a living memorial in its self of the brave loyal heart



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