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Death and grief have political currency: profound meaning is attached to how people die, the way their bodies are treated and the responses of their loved ones and wider communities. As Thomas Laqueur argues, the dead are made to 'work' for the state and the nation, particularly in liberal democracies during wartime. But, Elaine Scarry notes, death can be a destabilising force too, the corpse exhibiting a 'referential instability'. As Lucy Noakes expertly demonstrates through evocative and well-crafted case studies from across wartime Britain, death – and particularly civilian death – can threaten the 'shared aims and shared suffering' (p. 156) of a wartime nation. Communities and individuals can reject the grand narratives of collective pain and sacrifice, even as the state develops elaborate infrastructures and discourses surrounding mass death.

But the real power of Noakes' profoundly important and meticulously researched book comes from the emotional framework in which it situates death, grief and bereavement in Second World War Britain. To understand the deeper history of state, communal and individual responses to death and dying we need, Noakes argues, to turn to the longer 'emotional economy' of twentieth-century Britain. Instead of the 'Blitz Spirit', to understand death during the Second World War we need to analyse the gradual turning away from Victorian funerary practices, the battlefield cemeteries of the First World War (where the dead body became the eternal property of the state), the 1918 influenza pandemic, and grief and emotion in interwar Britain.

By the outbreak of war in 1939, British life was already shaped by an emotional economy that praised restraint and stoicism, and which was more self-reflective and concerned with the shaping of that 'self' than many assume. Like Mathew Thomson, Michal Shapira and Rhodri Hayward, Noakes reminds us that the modern 'project' of the self (as espoused by Anthony Giddens and others) owes so much to the period between the two total wars. This history of emotions and selfhood is traced...
through a wide range of sources, including letters to newspapers (heavily inflected with the
gendered assumptions of the time), novels and lay psychology books, before the book turns in detail
to Mass Observation (MO) source material produced from 1937. MO's wartime directives, such as
that on 'death and dying' commissioned in 1942, heavily inform the later chapters of the book and
provide many of the most moving examples that run throughout.

Noakes' study is sensitive to gender, class and region, as well as communal, sectarian and family
customs across the United Kingdom. In Chapter Seven on 'Grieving', Noakes also examines the
complex interplay between state messages, cultural texts and individuals: in Bristol, for example,
through public addresses stressing the shared sacrifice of civilians and soldiers alike, state and
church endeavoured to offer some 'emotional management' (p. 200) to grief, but they were also
contending (an MO report uncovered) with some of the worst urban morale in wartime Britain. Early
morning mass burials, still tainted with the memory of the pauper's grave, took place away from the
public eye, so fragile was the situation. Other instances of the Imperial War Graves Commission
pamphlet on military burials reaching relatives before official notification of a death, or families and
communities wrenching their dead back from the state, again show the complexity and instability of
grief during the war.

The book begins with an overview of funerary practices before the First World War, before moving
onto the 'emotional economy of interwar' Britain. The third chapter explores how death was
'imagined' in the interwar period, incorporating official reports and forecasts for deaths in the new
age of aerial bombardment. This area has already received a substantial amount of attention, led by
historians such as Susan Grayzel, but Noakes crucially links this well-known official history of
planning to the history of emotions. For instance, the issuing of identity discs to civilians was
rejected, so starkly did it imply lack of survival, even of recognisable bodily remains. Instead, the
Civilian War Dead Form was created and ordered in the thousands by local authorities, reflecting
fears that the 'knockout blow' would come from the air.
Chapter Four explores ideas and beliefs surrounding death in greater detail, including religion and superstition, followed by a chapter dedicated to dying itself centring on the bodily control the democratic state had but also exploring the visceral descriptions service personnel and civilians gave of death and bodies. The sixth chapter examines burial, including detailed case studies of contrasting mass burials in Coventry, Clydebank and Belfast; these fascinating case studies highlight the divergent responses to ideas of collective sacrifice and national effort and will be of great interest to historians of death, citizenship and the Second World War more broadly. The final two chapters examine grieving and remembering, exploring the discursive differences between the aftermath of the First World War and the Second. Despite the desire to provide 'living memorials' to the war dead, few were ever realised. As Noakes points out, the resultant lack of specific remembrance sites in Britain has perhaps led to the oversight of death itself in the history-writing of the Second World War, in contrast to the extensive work in this area by First World War historians. But as Noakes argues, the traditional demarcations of First World War, interwar, Second World War and post-war 'clearly do not hold' (p. 266) when we examine the cultural, social and emotional history of modern Britain. This book's skill in using death in Second World War Britain to tell a wider history of emotion, selfhood, state and community demonstrates this powerfully.

Its skilful handling of this serious subject matter is also relevant to historians working at the current time. I read this book in the early days of the coronavirus lockdown in the UK, when parallels with the Second World War were being greedily embraced by some and rebuffed by others and when the wrong analogies were frequently being drawn. This thoughtful book reminds us that societies interpret mass death on rhetorical, discursive and mnemonic levels, but people also live with its harsh practicalities, as death intersects with lived everyday experience and emotion. This book thus has much to teach both historians and a wider readership today.

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