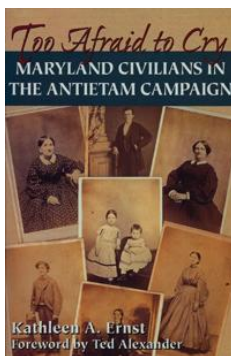


Kathleen Ernst
WRITING AT THE INTERSECTION OF PEOPLE, PLACES, AND THE PAST



Preview of *Too Afraid to Cry: Maryland Civilians in the Antietam Campaign*
A Non-Fiction American Civil War History Book

Written by Kathleen Ernst
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Historians identify the battle of Antietam (Sharpsburg), which unfolded on September 17, 1862, as “the bloodiest day in American history.” By best counts, more than 23,000 men were dead, wounded, or missing by nightfall. And left in the smoldering aftermath were the children, women, and men who made their homes in the village of Sharpsburg and on surrounding farms.

The military conflict that took place in western Maryland is a critical chapter in American history. But Civil War history is more than a schematic of armies and tactics. Considering the impact the Civil War had on Maryland, and conversely, Maryland had on the politics of both North and South, surprisingly little has been written about this divided state and her citizens. *Too Afraid to Cry* weaves together firsthand accounts and fast-paced narrative into a tapestry that accurately portrays the experiences of Unionist and secessionist citizens throughout the 1862 Maryland campaign.

In 1920 an elderly veteran named John Ware made the long trip from his home in Sewanee, Tennessee, to a tiny village in Washington County, Maryland. It was his second visit; fifty-eight years had passed since his first in 1862. He described the place with charming prose: “Sharpsburg pulls out its shoe string length along the Hagerstown-Shepherdstown Pike, a drowsy little one-street town, a Brer Rabbit sort of place. . . . no reason for going back, certainly no incentive for going forward, just a somnolent little lizard perpetually sunning itself. . . . It is like a painting, this serene landscape.”

But Ware hadn’t come to admire the scenery. He, and thousands of others who made the pilgrimage, came instead to commemorate a time when the



landscape was *not* serene. They came to relive a battle called Antietam Creek by the North and Sharpsburg by the South. Historians identify that battle, which unfolded on September 17, 1862, as “the bloodiest day in American history.” No other single day, before or since, ended with so many casualties. By best counts more than *twenty-three thousand* men were dead, wounded, or missing by nightfall.

Ware and the other veterans who visited over the years came and went, just as in 1862 they had come and gone. But left behind, as always, were the local residents. They couldn’t face down their memories on rare visits, then return to the anonymous safety of a distant home. They lived every day with reminders of the unimaginable.

In 1862 advancing technology gave the rest of the country a tiny glimpse of their experience. Photographer Alexander Gardner and his assistant, James F. Gibson, had hauled their glass plates and other cumbersome equipment to Sharpsburg and were on the field by September 18. A month after the battle Mathew Brady, the owner of a photography gallery in New York, mounted an exhibit of the Gardner/Gibson images called “The Dead of Antietam.” Field photography was in its infancy, and the show was a sensation. These were no carefully posed studio portraits or scenes of jaunty recruits poised for the front. The photos depicted bloated corpses, stiff and pathetic, robbed of shoes and other valuables by scavengers, awaiting burial. A *New York Times* reporter who visited the show wrote:

The living that throng Broadway care little for the Dead at Antietam, but we fancy they would jostle less carelessly down the great thoroughfare, saunter less at their ease, were a few dripping bodies,



fresh from the field, laid along the pavement . . . Mr. Brady has done something to bring home to us the terrible reality and earnestness of war. If he has not brought bodies and laid them in our door-yards and along streets, he has done something very like it.

New Yorkers like the reporter were far removed from the battlefield. The Civil War was a year and a half old in the autumn of 1862. The call to arms, the flood of naïve patriotism, and boasts of quick victories were in the past. The papers had too often been filled with endless lists of battlefield casualties, and too many doors had been swathed with black crepe. Americans had lost much of their innocence—and yet the woodcuts and engravings published in periodicals had still spared most the blunt horror of fratricide. These photographs pierced the veneer of delicacy. The public perception of war would never be the same.

A thousand miles away, the people who called the battlefield “home” would also never be the same. There, where the Antietam Creek meandered around the little town of Sharpsburg, Maryland, no photographs were needed. There, in the rutted village streets and nearby fertile farm fields, the “dripping bodies” had been all too real.

The military conflict that took place at Sharpsburg is a critical chapter in American history. But Civil War history is more than a schematic of armies and tactics. The women, men, and children who lived in Sharpsburg in Washington County were ordinary people caught in extraordinary circumstances. The war exploded on their thresholds, and the wake from that explosion rippled for miles. Their story is no less important than that of the soldiers, like John Ware, who marched across their cornfields.

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"Superbly readable... It will stand as the premier work on the subject for a long time."

— **Ted Alexander, Park Historian, Antietam National Battlefield**

"A masterful blend of military and social history that should be read by everyone."

— **Michael Russert, *The Civil War News***

"A book of unusual merit."

— **James Bready, *The Baltimore Sun***

Too Afraid to Cry: Maryland Civilians in the Antietam Campaign is available as a softcover book from independent bookstores, and from Amazon, Barnes & Nobles and other vendors. Personalized, hardcover copies can be acquired directly from the author, Kathleen Ernst. For more information, click on http://www.kathleernerst.com/book_too_afraid.php