

**“A deadly ball hath limited my life”:
Social constructs of the ‘Good Battlefield Death’ in the Revolutionary War**

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Abstract

The “Good Death,” as it was understood in the eighteenth century, involved being aware that one was going to die, making one’s peace with God, and having family and friends at the bedside to receive wisdom and edification. The dying person occupied a space between worlds, according to popular belief, and could give clues to those present at the deathbed about the mysteries of God and sacred truths. The battlefield death, with its suddenness, lack of decorum, and unpredictability, did not fit into this pattern, and that posed a problem – as the experience of Trumbull’s sister illustrates – for the revolutionary generation. This paper will argue that revolutionary battles were of such scale, reached so deeply into the civilian population, and coincided so overtly with the birth of a new nation, that artists, writers, and chroniclers began to create a new version of the “Good Death” – a battlefield version of the good death – that could help to alleviate social stress. The “Good Battlefield Death,” conveyed through artistic works, narratives, funeral sermons, and oration, depicted the dying soldier as being able to ask forgiveness for sins and offer his soul to god, die with a comrade at his side, acknowledge those being left behind, receiving well wishes and respect from those present, giving advice to those still fighting, and signify the righteousness of the cause he was fighting for.

Key Words: Revolutionary War, death, mourning, social construct, Joseph Warren, John Trumbull, artistic works, battlefield

On 18 June 1775, the day after the battle of Bunker Hill, John Trumbull, an artist and citizen-soldier serving in the First Regiment of Connecticut stationed at Roxbury, received a party of visitors. “The novelty of military scenes,” Trumbull explained in his autobiography, “excited great curiosity through the country, and my sister was one of a party of young friends who were attracted to visit the army before Boston.”¹ That her visit happened to be the day after a brutal battle in which Joseph Warren, a young doctor who had been the toast of the patriot community of Boston, had been killed, was an unfortunate coincidence. Evidence of the previous day’s horrors were all around her: “She found herself surrounded not by the ‘pomp and circumstance of glorious war,’ but in the midst of all its horrible realities.”² The disconnect between the expected “pomp and circumstance” of a “glorious” war and the grim reality of a battle scene literally drove the young woman mad: “---It overcame her strong, but too sensitive mind. She became deranged,” wrote Trumbull, and she died just five months later.³

Although the reaction of Trumbull’s sister was extreme, she was by no means alone in her sentiments. Participants in the fighting itself registered their shock. Samuel Blachley Webb, a lieutenant from Connecticut, explained the grisly scene his regiment encountered on their approach to the battlefield in a letter: “On our March down we met many of our worthy friends wounded sweltering in their Blood,--- carried on the Shoulders of their fellow Soldiers--- judge you what must be our feelings at this shocking Spectacle.”⁴ Even worse, in Webb’s mind, was the rapid gunfire which ripped through the ranks: “When we mounted the Summit, where the engagement was,--- good God how the Balls flew.--- I freely Acknowledge I never had such a

¹John Trumbull, *Autobiography, Reminiscences and Letters of John Trumbull, from 1756 to 1841*, (New York & London: Wiley & Putnam, 1841), 22.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴Samuel Web. “Letter of Samuel B. Webb to Joseph Webb.” *Correspondence and Journals of Samuel Blachley Webb: 1772-1777, Volume 1*, (Lancaster, PA: Wickersham Press, 1893) 64.

tremor come over me before.”⁵ British as well as American participants recoiled at the sheer violence of the engagement. John Waller, an adjutant of the Royal Marines, was dumbfounded by the destructiveness of his own unit’s bayonet charge: “I was with those two companies who drove bayonets into all that opposed them. Nothing could be more shocking than the carnage that followed the storming [of] this work. We tumbled over the dead to get at the living...[with] soldiers stabbing some and dashing out the brains of others.”⁶ From the words of these men, it is clear that the battle which occurred that day was true carnage.

Trumbull, as a participant in the war and an artist, saw at first hand, from his sister and the soldiers who surrounded him, the need for presenting the battlefield death as a palatable one according to eighteenth-century norms and beliefs. The “Good Death,” as it was understood in the eighteenth century, involved being aware that one was going to die, making one’s peace with God, and having family and friends at the bedside to receive wisdom and edification. The dying person occupied a space between worlds, according to popular belief, and could give clues to those present at the deathbed about the mysteries of God and sacred truths. The battlefield death, with its suddenness, lack of decorum, and unpredictability, did not fit into this pattern, and that posed a problem – as the experience of Trumbull’s sister illustrates – for the revolutionary generation. This paper will argue that revolutionary battles were of such scale, reached so deeply into the civilian population, and coincided so overtly with the birth of a new nation, that artists, writers, and chroniclers began to create a new version of the “Good Death” – a battlefield version of the Good Death – that could help to alleviate social stress. The “Good Battlefield Death,” conveyed through artistic works, narratives, funeral sermons, and orations, depicted the dying soldier as having the ability to ask forgiveness for sins and offer his soul to god, die with a

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ “Account of Adjutent Waller, Royal Marines,” in ed. Samuel Adams Drake *Bunker Hill: The Story Told in Letters from the Battle Field by British Officers Engaged*, (Boston: Nichols and Hall, 1875), 28.

comrade at his side, acknowledge those being left behind, receive well wishes and respect from those present, give advice to those still fighting, and signify the righteousness of the cause he was fighting for.

Historian Drew Gilpin Faust has studied the concept of the Good Death in the context of the Civil War, because the gruesomeness was more difficult to conceal with the introduction of photography. Commentators during that period therefore developed social constructs which would allow people to bridge the gap between the reality of meaningless mass death on the battlefield and the more reassuring ideas about death and the meaning it gave to life as dictated by the traditional “Good Death”.⁷ The Revolution, however, was a moment at which such cultural interventions were also needed. Here we will use the Battle of Bunker Hill to examine how artists, writers, and orators – including John Trumbull, with his iconic painting of the death of the beloved Joseph Warren – created the concept of the good battlefield death in the dawning moments of the American Revolution

Because Warren was considered by his contemporaries to be the perfect patriot -- young, charismatic, humble and honorable --he is the perfect case study to evaluate the importance of the Good Battlefield Death, as his death would be the standard to which people would hold others. This paper will rely on the painting and writings of John Trumbull, the death speech of Warren from the play “The Battle of Bunkers-Hill,” by Hugh Henry Brackenridge, two funeral orations given on his behalf, eyewitness accounts of Warren’s death, and the letters of Abigail Adams, to illustrate how people reacted to the death of this patriot and the strategies they used to ease the pain of that loss, arguing that these techniques became the foundation for the Good Battlefield Death.

⁷ Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 30-31.

The Battle of Bunker Hill, which occurred on 17 June 1775, is a prime example of fighting in close proximity to the civilian population. The battle was one of the first in the conflict between the British and American colonists, occurring during the Siege of Boston, even before the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Taking place on Breed's Hill, which was near the outskirts of Boston, civilians were able to see the much of what happened. The young John Quincy Adams was a witness to the event, and wrote much later of the sadness he felt: “I saw with my own eyes those fires, and heard Britannia’s thunders in the Battle of Bunker’s hill and witnessed the tears of my mother and mingled with them my own.”⁸ In all, 226 British troops and 115 American troops lost their lives that day.

Among the dead was General Joseph Warren. Warren was just thirty-four years old at the time of the Battle of Bunker Hill. A physician by trade, he had one of the busiest medical practices in Boston and was renowned for having “the touch” which put patients at ease.⁹ As a politician, he was one of “the most vigorous propagandists” of the revolutionary party in Massachusetts, and he eventually became president of the Provincial Congress in that state. Warren had been the one to send Paul Revere to alert people of the arrival of the British.¹⁰ Arguably, he became “the most influential patriot leader in the province of Massachusetts” in the critical time between the Battle of Lexington and the Battle of Bunker Hill,¹¹ and had overseen the creation of an army from the “raw militia” which would be able to match the well-trained British Army.¹² He was young, charming and charismatic, which led to fierce loyalty and admiration from the troops which he led. Although he had been appointed a major general on the day of the Battle of Bunker Hill, Warren declined, choosing to fight as a common soldier

⁸ John Quincy Adams, “John Quincy Adams to Joseph Sturge, March 1846”.

⁹ Nathaniel Philbrick, *Bunker Hill: A City, a Siege, a Revolution*, (New York: Viking, 2013), 47.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* xvi.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² John Cary, *Joseph Warren: Physician, Politician, Patriot*, (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1961), viii.

instead.¹³ During the battle, Warren was killed with a shot to the face just below his left eye which exited through the back of his skull.¹⁴

At this point in history, death was still a part of everyday life. Hospitals would not be in use in America for almost another 100 years, and the medical profession, in the modern sense, had yet to be established. Therefore, the average person knew about wounds, illness, and death because they either had to tend to these ailments themselves or have a healer do it for them, which, even then, normally occurred in the home of the patient. Funerals were held in the home as well, and the family and neighbors of the diseased were expected to clean and dress the bodies beforehand.¹⁵

Though the average person dealt with the death of loved ones many times during their lives, this does not mean that they were desensitized to it. The mystery of what happens after the body dies had been a point of anxiety for humanity long before the Revolutionary period. One of the ways that Christianity combated this anxiety was by presenting the *Ars Morendi*, a spiritual guide to the proper way to die dating from the fourteenth century and still popular – though adapted to different cultural contexts – down through the revolutionary period. If one died a “good” death, the text asserted, then one’s soul would be allowed to enter heaven, the ultimate paradise. The customary ideas of dying at home surrounded by friends and family, asking God for forgiveness, accepting death, having noble last words, and behaving in a respectable manner while awaiting death, all originated with the *Ars Morendi*.¹⁶

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Philbrick, *Bunker Hill*, 229.

¹⁵ Margaret M. Coffin, *Death in Early America: the History and Folklore of Customs and Superstitions of Early Medicine, Funerals, Burials, and Mourning*, (New York: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1976) Funeral Customs.

¹⁶ Jeffrey Campbell and Louis Kelly, “*The Ars Moriendi*”: An examination, translation, and collation of the manuscripts of the shorter Latin version, (Ontario: University of Ottawa, 1995).

Those who died in battle did not have the luxury of circumstance which would allow for them to meet all the criteria of the traditional Good Death. Clearly the soldier would not be dying at home, and even if the dying person was lucky enough to have a member of the family present in the fighting and able to be there for the death, the entire family certainly would not be able to be present. The acceptance of death would be in doubt most of the time because of the abruptness of war, as would the petition for forgiveness. Then there was the question of dying in a respectable manner, which in the traditional sense meant lying peacefully in bed, awaiting death. This would not have been how most would die in war.

Even if the person dying in battle did not achieve all of the requirements for the Good Battlefield Death, many found ways to assert that they did. Friends and supposed witnesses of deaths told tales, some true and some fanciful, of how the person died in a way which asserted that the person did, in fact, die in a good and noble fashion. So too did writers and artisans of the period depict battlefield death scenes as devoid of the gruesomeness which the reality would have held, instead allowing the dying person a small wound which gave time to meet all of the requirements for a good death before leaving this life. The truth of these sources is not important; it is the way in which people imagine death — a good death— which is truly telling.

John Trumbull, being not only a soldier, but also an artist, created one of the most popular depictions of the Battle of Bunker Hill. His painting “The Death of General Warren at the Battle of Bunker’s Hill, 17 June, 1775,” depicts the death scene of General Joseph Warren after he was shot in the head as the battle drew to a close. The main focus of the painting is General Warren, with Col. Small, a British soldier with whom Warren had been “intimately connected,” holding him up as he expired. Small, according to Trumbull, “saw him fall, and flew

to save him.”¹⁷ Trumbull described the saving actions of Small, who “with one hand wards off the bayonet of a British grenadier, who, in the heat and fury natural at such a moment, aims to revenge the death of a favorite officer, Col. Abercrombie, who had fallen at his feet.”¹⁸ Small is depicted as holding back the musket of the grenadier, “to prevent the fatal blow.” As to Warren himself, he is depicted dying “with a smile of mingled gratitude and triumph.” In the background, several American soldiers, though without weapons, “are seen to persist in resistance obstinate and desperate, but fruitless.”¹⁹ General Putnam is seen at the side of the painting, ordering the retreat “of these brave men, while beyond him a party of the American troops oppose their last fire to the victorious colony of the enemy.” On the right side of the painting, a wounded American soldier “has begun to retire, attended by a faithful negro,” but witnessing the fall of Warren, “hesitates to save himself, or, wounded as he is, to return and assist in saving a life more precious to his country than his own.”²⁰ In the background, British troops, victorious, can be seen ascending the hill.

The artist, John Trumbull, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper, was a participant in the battle whose sister was traumatized by looking upon its aftermath. Just two months prior to the Battle of Bunker Hill, Trumbull had joined the First Regiment of Connecticut, which reached Boston in early May of 1775 and was stationed at Roxbury.²¹ A few days after the Bunker Hill incident, he was even promoted the position of aide-du-camp to Gen. George Washington. Trumbull remembered clearly how his unit had drawn enemy fire:

¹⁷ John Trumbull, *Autobiography, Reminiscences and Letters by John Trumbull from 1756 to 1841* (New York, London, and New Haven, 1841), 412.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Trumbull, *Autobiography*, 18.

In the mean time, when the firing became frequent and heavy, the troops in Roxbury were ordered under arms, and to their posts. Gen. Spencer's regiment was drawn up on their parade, in full view of the enemy's lines, and it was not long before we attracted their attention and their fire. Several of their heavy shots passed over us, and we were soon ordered to fall back to the hill above the meeting-house. It was my duty as adjutant to bring up the rear, and pick up stragglers.²²

That Trumbull's regiment was called in during the heaviest of the fighting, and that he himself was responsible for the "stragglers," most of whom would have most likely been wounded, means he would have seen a great deal of carnage. Trumbull was a witness to the reality of the gruesomeness of battle, and yet he chose not to depict this scene in a realistic fashion. This could be for several reasons, one of which was the reaction of his sister the day that she was faced with the reality of war: becoming overwhelmed to the point that it caused mental incapacity. He took it upon himself as an artist to be the mediator, to show people death in a way which had less to do with reality and more to do with how he himself felt about the subject and circumstance. In his autobiography, Trumbull wrote of how the aim of this painting, and one that he created of General Joseph Montgomery's death in an assault on Quebec, was to pay tribute to the fallen leaders, which would have included the historical memory of how they died: "These [the deaths of General Warren and General Joseph Montgomery] were the earliest important events in point of time, and I not only regarded them as highly interesting passages of history, but felt, that in painting them, I should be paying a just tribute of gratitude to the memory of eminent men, who had given their lives for their country."²³

²² *Ibid*, 20-21.

²³ *Ibid*, 93.

Abigail Adams, who had been close friends with Warren and whose husband had been a mentor to him, wrote in a letter to her sister her reaction the first time viewing this painting. Mrs. Adams describes her physical reaction of being overwhelmed by the image, and insisted that Trumbull had depicted the scene in a way that placed Warren's sterling character front and center:

Mr Trumble has made a painting of the battle at Charstown and the Death of Generall Warren. To speak of its merit, I can only say; that in looking at it, my whole frame contracted, my Blood Shiverd and I felt a faintness at my Heart... By this means he will ...transmit to Posterity Characters and actions which will command the admiration of future ages and prevent the period which gave birth to them from ever passing away into the dark abiss of time whilst he teaches, mankind, that it is not rank, or titles, but Character alone which interest Posterity.²⁴

According to Adams, while the image was full of historical inaccuracies, it captured the essence of the man she knew, and did so in a manner which would immortalize him and the cause for which he fought.

One of the elements of the typical Good Death of the time, which carried over into the social construct of the Good Battlefield Death, was that of offering one's soul to god just before expiring. This offering of the soul to God was present in Trumbull's painting, though not explicitly. The positioning of Warren's body, face up, gazing at heaven was long thought the proper way to die. This positioning of the body for death was designated "proper" by the thirteenth century liturgists, one of whom, Guillaume Durand, bishop of Mende, wrote "The

²⁴ Abigail Adams, "Abigail Adams to Elizabeth Shaw, London March 4 1786".

dying man must lie on his back so that his face is always turned toward heaven.”²⁵ This was seen as a preparatory step, after which the dying person could then express to God their last feelings and sentiments.

Another example of a popular depiction of Warren’s death in which he offers his soul to God can be found in the play “The Battle of Bunkers-Hill.” In 1776 Hugh Henry Brackenridge wrote this dramatization of the events of the battle in which the General gave a two page speech as he was dying. In the first line of his speech, General Warren fulfills this offering: “A deadly ball hath limited my life. And now to God, I offer my soul.”²⁶ This was one of the most important aspects of both the traditional Good Death and the Good Battlefield Death, as the ultimate goal of both was the forgiveness of sin and entry to heaven. This can be seen in the placement of the offering in the first lines of his speech, even before Warren encouraged the men to fight on or acknowledged any cause to do so.

For the person dying the Good Battlefield Death, offering the soul to God was important, but so too was instructing and inspiring those who would continue fighting. The last line of the dying speech given by General Warren in *The Battle of Bunkers-Hill* read, “Fight on, my countrymen, be FREE, be Free.”²⁷ In the same vein, Amos Foster, a private fighting for the colonists, wrote an account in which Warren’s last words were of encouragement to those still fighting: “His words left a lasting impression on my mind and I have repeated them a thousand times...I saw General Warren, his clothes were bloody, when he cried out to us: ‘I am a dead man, fight on, my brave fellows, for the salvation of your country.’”²⁸

²⁵ Philippe Aries, *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), .

²⁶ Hugh Henry Brackenridge, *The Battle at Bunkers-Hill: A Dramatic Piece of Five Acts in Heroic Measure*. (play, The Project Gutenberg, 1776), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/29225/29225-h/29225-h.htm>.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ “Letter”, *Foster Genealogy, Part 1*, ed. Frederick Clifton Pierce (Press of W.B. Conkey Company, 1899), 250.

Because of the interesting social circumstances of the Revolutionary war, being more like a civil war in some places, one can see a phenomenon where the Good Battlefield Death of this time included the dying person commanding the respect of those around them, even if they were fighting on opposite sides of the battle lines. To examine again the painting of General Warren by John Trumbull, one can see that the dying General Warren was about to be stabbed by a British soldier with the bayonet on his rifle, but a British officer held him back from killing Warren. This image drew on an account which circulated shortly after Warren's death, which stated his body was identified by Mr. John Jefferies, a Boston physician and military surgeon with the British Army, after the battle was over. After the identification of Warren's body, some soldiers had suggested cutting his head off, but a fellow mason prevented this from happening.²⁹ Trumbull described this depiction of the story:

Col. Small (whose conduct in America was always equally distinguished by acts of humanity and kindness to his enemies, as by bravery and fidelity to the cause he served,) had been intimately connected with Gen. Warren, —saw him fall, and flew to save him. He is represented seizing the musket of a grenadier, to prevent the fatal blow and speaking to his friend; it was too late; he had lost the power of speech and expired with a smile of mingled gratitude and triumph.³⁰

To the truth of this account, no one can say for sure, as evidence is found only in second-hand accounts. It is clear that Small, though fighting against Warren in battle, attempted to prevent him from being killed.

This account of General Warren dying in the presence of Colonial Small fits into another social construct of the good battlefield death: dying at the side of a friend. In the traditional Good

²⁹ Cary, *Joseph Warren*, 222.

³⁰ Trumbull, *Autobiography*, 412.

Death, the person dying would be surrounded by family members. These family members would not only attend to the needs of the dying man, but they would also observe and assess the deathbed performance of the dying person, per the standard of the Good Death. This was done in order that the family might know the salvation status of that person's soul, as the deathbed was seen as a defining moment of the person's life. Because fighting in the war meant that the soldier would not have family in their presence if they were to die, the brother in arms would often take that place, acting as a surrogate family. Note again how Trumbull describes Small as "intimately connected" to Warren, equating him with a family member, and how Small held Warren, making him more comfortable than if he were to be lying on the ground, to which Warren gave him a "smile of...gratitude."³¹ The question of the salvation of Warren's soul seems to be up to the viewer, but taking the reaction of the affection for Warren by the other American troops in the painting, charging without any weapons, considering going back to aid him even though they were wounded, and reluctantly retreating, it is clear that those soldiers believed him to be worth dying for, and therefore, a good man who died a Good Battlefield Death.

Another element of the Good Battlefield Death which involved the family was the acknowledgment of the family which the dying man was leaving behind. For General Warren, this was an odd circumstance. Warren was a widower with four small daughters. He had been courting and was recently engaged to Miss Mercy Scollay when he died, leaving his daughters in her care while he was off fighting, but after he died, she had no legal claim to the children.³² In the speech that Breckenridge placed into Warren's mouth in the play, "The Battle of Bunker-Hill," the general voiced concern for the well-being of his daughters after he died – something there would not have been time for in the real event, "Weep not your Gen'ral, who is snatch'd

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Philbrick, *Bunker Hill*, 247.

this day, From the embraces of a family, Five virgin daughters young, and unendow'd, Now with the foe left lone and fatherless." In an anonymous poem now agreed to have been the work of Miss Scollay, the author also expressed sympathy for the young girls who had lost their father:

Ye Orphan Babes, sweet Pledges of their love,
 In lisping accents speak his tinder Care;
 Your Artless Tale must ev'ry bosom move,
 And make each throbbing Heart its Grief declare.
 And since he's gone, whose kind parental Hand
 Supply'd each want, and watch'd your tender Age,
 May ev'ry parent through th'extensive Land
 With grateful Thoughts on your behalf engage. ³³

The fate of these children was more uncertain than it would have been if they had lost their father after the creation of benefits to be paid upon the death of a soldier. But this would not come until nearly a century later, so on top of the loss of their mother just two years prior and the recent loss of their father, the young girls' financial fate was uncertain. Miss Scollay's attention to both the grief of losing their Father and this uncertain future of who would care for them—for she had no legal standing on behalf of the children, though they had been in her care in the absence of Warren, and her call to every parent in the colonies to be moved by their story—is understandable.

Aside from a British soldier, Col. Small, being used as a surrogate family member in Trumbull's painting, the differing accounts on burial of General Warren's body by the British troops can be seen as another example of how people wanted to think of the British's respect

³³ Samuel A Forman, *Dr. Joseph Warren: The Boston Tea Party, Bunker Hill, and the Birth of American Liberty*, (Gretna: Pelican Publishing Company, 2012), 378.

toward their fallen general. The oration given by his Masonic brethren in Boston recounted the finding of the body: “We searched in the Field for the murdered Son of a Widow, and we found him, by the Turf and the Twig, buried on the Brow of a Hill, tho’ not in a decent Grave.”³⁴ Warren had belonged to the St. Andrew’s Masonic Lodge since 1761, and from 1765 until the outbreak of the Revolution, he was one of the most active Masons in North America.³⁵ Many of the key players of the Revolution, such as Paul Revere, John Pulling, John Hancock and others, belonged to the same lodge as Warren, and indeed, began to look to Warren for political leadership because of their ties to the same lodge.³⁶ In his biography of Joseph Warren, John Cary noted the unique friendship that existed between Warren and his fellow brethren: “His magnetic personality and sincere friendship gained a personal loyalty from these men, who accorded to other Radical leaders only a grudging political obedience.” This respect that the masonic brothers held for Warren could account for the description of his first burial, at the top of a hill and marked, though they mention in the end of the statement that the burial was not “decent”.

The account of British Captain Walter Laurie, who found the body of Warren after the battle, was very different in sentiment. That the body was at the top of a hill and marked made it seem like he was given some sort of respect, but from Laurie’s writing we get a taste of one British officer’s disgust for the man: “Doctor Warren, President of the Provincial Congress, and Captain General, in the Absence of Hancock and [Samuel] Adams, and next to Adams, in abilities, I found among the Slain, and stuffed the Scoundrel with another Rebel, into one hole,

³⁴ Perez Morton, *An oration; delivered at the King's-Chapel in Boston, April 8, 1776, on the re-interment of the remains of the late most worshipful Grand-Master Joseph Warren, Esquire; president of the late Congress of this colony, and major-general of the Massachusetts forces; who was slain in the Battle of Bunker's-Hill, June 17, 1775.* (Boston: J. Gill, in Queen-Street., 1776). from Early American Imprints.

³⁵ Cary, *Joseph Warren*, 56.

³⁶ Cary, *Joseph Warren*, 56-57.

and there he, and his seditious principles may remain.”³⁷ Clearly there was a disconnect between how the British felt about Warren and how the colonists wanted to portray how the British felt about Warren. Abigail Adams commented on how appalled she was after hearing of how the British had treated Warren’s body:

We learn from one of these Deserters that our ever valued Friend Warren, dear to us even in Death; was [not] treated with any more respect than a common soldier, but the [sav]age wretches call’d officers consulted together and agreed to sever his Head from his body, and carry it in triumph to Gage, who no doubt would have “grin’d horrible a gasty smile,” instead of imitating Ceasar who far from being gratified with so horrid a Spectacle, as the Head even of his Enimy, turned away from Pompeys with disgust and gave vent to his pitty in a flood of tears.³⁸

Abigail went on to write that a Masonic brother had heard of Warren’s death and had requested a decent burial for him, only to find the indecent grave he already occupied, “An officer who it seems was one of the Brotherhood requested that as a Mason he might have the body unmangled, and find a decent interment for it. He obtaind his request, but upon returning to secure it, he found it already thrown into the Earth, only with the ceremony of being first placed there, with many bodies over him...”³⁹

It was of utmost importance that those who lost their lives on the battlefield did so in the name of a righteous cause, for this justified the death in the minds of those left fighting. In his speech in the play “The Battle of Bunkers-Hill,” some of Warren’s last words spoke to the cause which he believed that he was dying for and he imparted to the other men the importance of the

³⁷ Walter Sloane Laurie, “Camp on Charles Town Heights”.

³⁸ Abigail Adams, “Abigail Adams to John Adams, July 31, 1775”.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

cause not dying with him: “Let not the cause, The sacred cause of liberty, with me Faint or expire. By the last parting breath, And blood of this you fellow soldier slain, Be now adjur’d, never to yield the right...To man’s free nature, that he rule himself.”⁴⁰ According to Warren, liberty was a righteous cause, one that was worth his life. By this reasoning, his death was justified, as it was given in the name of the righteous cause of liberty.

In the Oration delivered at his re-internment, the righteousness of the cause which Warren had willingly given his life for was again addressed, this time in terms not just of liberty, but of salvation, “Art thou risen again to exhibit thy glorious Wounds, and thro’ then proclaim Salvation to thy Country!...And the World may wonder, that he so readily offered up his life, on the altar of his Country, when they are told that the main Pillar of Masonry, is the Love of Mankind.”⁴¹ The orator went on further to say that Warren “sealed his principals with his Blood” and “fell in the cause of Virtue and Mankind.” Here Warren was portrayed as a Christ-like figure. His righteous cause was the salvation of the country and love of mankind, which people believed gave his death meaning.

Taking all of these elements of the Good Battlefield Death as exemplified by Warren into consideration, it becomes clear that people felt a great sense of affection toward the man. This would have been true of many who fought and died in the war. Thought this was a time in which emotional outbursts were frowned upon in society, it does not mean that the emotionalism which would define mourning in the following century did not exist in this time or that people were not as emotionally connected in the eighteenth century as they were in the nineteenth century. The reaction of John Trumbull’s sister when faced with the aftermath of such a bloody battle shows that people could be driven to extreme emotion in these circumstances. It was her realization that

⁴⁰ Brackenridge, *The Battle at Bunkers-Hill*.

⁴¹ Perez Morton, *Oration*.

her favorite brother and her husband could die like the men on Breed's Hill that drove her to madness. Others reacted in less extreme ways when faced with Warren's death, but in emotional ways nonetheless. Miss Scollay had been emotionally devastated by the death of her fiancée: "the distress I soon after suffered with any uncertain situation," she wrote in a letter to John Hancock, "rendered me for a time incapable of writing or feeling any animating sensations."⁴² John Eliot wrote how the loss of Warren was devastating to the people he led, saying, "The loss of such a man in addition to our defeat, and at a time when the distracted state of our affairs greatly needed his advice, threw a gloom upon the circumstances of the people, and excited the most sincere lamentation and mourning."⁴³ Abigail Adams wrote to her husband of the pain she felt at the loss of Warren: "Not all the havock and devastation they [the British] have made [of Boston], has wounded me like the death of Warren." She continued, "We mourn for the citizen, the senator, the physician and the Warriour."⁴⁴ These feelings of grief led people to need a means to soften the pain of loss which they felt. The social construct of the Good Battlefield Death was a means of making sense of and giving meaning to the loss of such a loved one in battle.

⁴² Mercy Scollay, "Mercy Scollay to John Hancock, May 21, 1776".

⁴³ John Eliot, *A Biographical Dictionary: Containing a Brief Account of the First Settlers, and Other Eminent Characters Among the Magistrates, Ministers, Literary and Worthy Men, in New-England*, (Boston: Crushing and Appleton, 1809), 474.

⁴⁴ Abigail Adams, "Abigail Adams to Samuel Adams, July 5, 1775".

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