

September 2011

From Battlefields Rising: How the Civil War Transformed American Literature

by Randall Fuller

Oxford U. Press New York, NY, 2011, 224 pages.

reviewed by Carole Babyak

This book examines how battles, as well as the whole war, affected writers of the time, giving us a viewpoint that is seldom discussed. People's opinions and the pulse of the nation were reflected by these writers.

There was a fascination with Mt. Vesuvius during the 19th Century. When Ralph Waldo Emerson returned from Europe he brought a painting of Vesuvius erupting, spewing fire, smoke lifting up in the sky as if reaching to heaven. This painting was the first and last thing visitors saw when they entered his house. An erupting volcano is a powerful image representing war; destruction, transformation of the environment, and from a distance, a sight both spectacular and magnetic. Thus, from a distance these battles appear mingled with heroism and glory.

A volcanic image could also mirror the influence American literature had in breaking away from Europe, a true expression of America hopefully united. Each author dealt with the war in different ways: Hawthorne visited Washington and penned a discussion between Peaceable Man and his editor, trying to sort out death and the moral force that held the Union together, and Walt Whitman volunteered as a nurse to be close to his brother and wrote some of America's most poignant and eloquent poems. Emily Dickinson wrote letters to abolitionist Thomas W Higginson, who led the 51st Colored Mass. Infantry. Higginson wrote down the songs of the slaves. Dickinson wrote her best poems during the war, during news of friends losing their lives. Herman Melville was the only author to actually ride with the troops, to experience the adrenalin surge of battle. After the war he became a national beloved poet. His poem "Shiloh" is a requiem and "The Armies of the Wilderness" is an epitaph for the whole era. He thought as Lincoln thought, that the south and the north had to be brought together.

At the beginning of the war the Emerson family, like many people in Massachusetts were strong abolitionists. They thought some blood had to be spilt to reach the goal, the iconic volcano erupting. However, as the battles took the lives of local boys, the unseen smoke of the volcano stifled creativity and his fire of the volcano became a dimming spark. Emerson's son wanted to join the army, but he was told that he must stay at Harvard and finish school. Emerson never did let his son join. They survived the war and Emerson retained his lofty reputation as America's transcendental writer.

The best-selling novel after the war was by Elizabeth Phelps titled *The Gate Ajar*, a story about heaven. The brother who was killed in the war says heaven is an exalted version of life on earth. Thus all the lost soldiers were at peace and content. People were tired of the battles, but the volcano had awakened America, never again would it be dormant. Emerson's volcano survived.

October 2011

War Like the Thunderbolt: The Battle and Burning of Atlanta

By Russell S. Bonds

Westholme Publ., Yardley, PA 2009

reviewed by Carole Babyak

This information-packed book begins with the filming of the first scene of *Gone with the Wind*; burning the back lot in Hollywood which represented the burning of Atlanta. In 1939 the Ebenezer Baptist Church choir sang for the premiere of the movie on Peach Street. The reverend's 10-year-old son Martin Luther King sang in the choir. Jonesboro, a key Railroad link, was the site for the fictional Tara. Leaving this, the book jumps to the Union advance and occupation of Atlanta. You will come to know Gen. Sherman after reading the 402 pages as well as understanding his relationship with Gen. Thomas, who was credited with the victory at Peach Tree Creek (a battle seldom covered in history, thus not revealing Thomas' role).

Insight into Gen. Hood's personality is also included, like a poker game where Hood bet \$2,500 with not a pair in his hand. Col. Benjamin Harrison, 70th Indiana Regiment, saved his commanding officer and was so recognized by Gen. Hooker for promotion. Harrison got a severe case of poison ivy, so he began his habit of wearing gloves and later was known as the kid glove politician. Col. John S. Pemberton, CSA, later settled in Atlanta as a pharmacist creating hair dye, cough syrup and his brain tonic which became Coca Cola.

Many more individual incidents are in this book, with Sherman's letters to Gen. Hood and the Mayor of Atlanta containing his most memorable quotes. The Pros and Cons of Sherman's bombing of Atlanta are discussed and the book ends with a quote from Union Gen. James H. Wilson's conversation with the artist who was painting his portrait. "One can't put down history as it really happened – people don't want it – it would shock them. People have formed their own ideas in regard to history and they do not want them dismembered." Interesting!

November 2011

The Union War

by Gary Gallagher

Harvard U. Press, 2011, Cambridge, Mass, 162 pages

reviewed by Carole Babyak

In this book, Gary Gallagher examines the Civil War from patriotism in trying to preserve the Union and the individual soldier's thoughts about fighting and emancipation through General Sherman and Pres. Abraham Lincoln's insistence that the country should be a banner of democracy to inspire others under oligarchy rule. This paved the way for the voting citizen to be free to pursue economic success, unlike what was happening in most countries in Europe.

The Union meant country and nation, and this war proved the Union could survive. Some critics cry that too much has been written of the soldier; the author points out with many examples that the soldier fought the war and is deserving of attention. There was much pride in what they did, which is shown in the enthusiasm to compile regimental histories and post-war reunions.

Immigrants happily fought for their adopted country to preserve what they came here for: freedom and justice. And there was freedom for the slaves. Emancipation came everywhere the Union Army advanced; military presence wiped out slavery.

U.S. Grant in 1870, speaking on a world tour to a group of Americans near Hamburg, Germany, distilled in five sentences what loyal citizens would have said gave the most meaning to their great internecine conflict: "What saved the Union, was the coming forward of the young men of the nation. They came from their homes and fields, as they did in the time of the Revolution, giving everything to the country. To their devotion we owe the salvation of the Union. The humblest soldier who carried a musket is entitled to as much credit for the results of the war as those who were in command. So long as our young men are animated by this spirit there will be no fear for the Union."

December 2011

The Civil War at Sea

by Craig L. Symonds, Professor Emeritus at the U.S. Naval Academy and the author of *Lincoln and His Admirals*

Praeger, Santa Barbara, California, 2009

reviewed by Carole Babyak

This book contains a lot of information; which is reflected by my five pages of notes. The Navy and Marines of the Civil War are not frequently written about; however, their exploits are just as exciting as the land conflicts. This compact book covers all aspects, as shown in the chapter headlines: "Ships and Guns," "Blockade and Blockade Runners," "War on Commerce" and "Unvexed to the Sea," the story of the brown water Navies under Army command. Both sides are covered.

The early co-operation of Gen. Grant and the Navy's Admiral Foote in capturing Fort Henry and Ft. Donelson was critical in that success. David Farragut (adopted brother of Capt. David D. Porter) was determined to sail past Ft. Jackson and Ft. St. Phillip on the Mississippi, and was successful helping the Union gain control of that river. The three-year siege of Charleston, SC, was not broken by the Navy until Gen. Sherman, in 1865, cut off that city. However, joint operations were more successful in capturing Vicksburg and Ft. Fisher. Capt. David Porter at Vicksburg was as heroic as his Army counterparts.

The book covers Confederate torpedoes and submarines and recounts the voyage of the C.S. Shenandoah, first sailing in Oct. 1864, raiding U.S. ships, unaware that the war had ended, then Nov. 6, 1865, landing in England. Exciting reading that enriches knowledge, the author concludes that although the South was most creative in iron plating the warships, torpedoes and submarines, the exploits of the Navies did not determine the outcome of the war—but did affect the trajectory and length!

February 2012*Lincoln on War*

Ed. & Introduction by Harold Holzer, (Chairman of Lincoln's Bicentennial Foundation)

Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, NC, 201 pp

by Carole Babyak

This 193 page book contains all of Lincoln's words concerning war. The editor includes the date of the original speech or publication, enabling the scholar or general reader to grasp what was actually happening along with Lincoln's struggle. Inspiring reading and a book you could pick up and read from any section. Thought provoking; even if you've read many books about Lincoln, this is a book that all should read.

April 2011*The Untold Civil War: Exploring the Human Side of War*

James Robertson, edited by Neil Kagan

National Geographic Society, Washington, D.C. 2011

AND

The Civil War: A Visual History

Smithsonian, DK Publishing, NY, NY 2011

reviewed by Carole Babyak

Both these books are large format, hefty books of 345 pages for the National Geographic book and 351 pages for the Smithsonian book. Both have abundant, lush Civil War era photographs and illustrations as well as contemporary photos of Civil War artifacts.

Some photos have been seen before but, modern reproduction and printing has given some of these old photos a sharpness and vigor not seen before. The people's eyes which always did take you into their story, now are more compelling, as if an old painting had been professionally cleaned and you see more color, more brilliance and details hidden by the dirt. The writing also has a clarity that only contemporary scholars who now write (hopefully) without bias; giving us a more thorough view of what our country went through. Both books are recommended during this 150 year Commemoration of the Civil War.

James Robertson is retired professor from Virginia Tech and was 31 years old when President John F. Kennedy appointed him Executive Director of the US Civil War Centennial Commission.

May 2012*Lincoln's Counsel: Lessons from America's Most Persuasive Speaker*

by Arthur L. Rizer III

American Bar Association, 2011

reviewed by Carole Babyak

The Author is Adjunct Professor of Law at Georgetown University Law School.

This 229 page book examines Lincoln's speeches and writings as court room terminology and as a lawyer's persuasiveness. Arthur Rizer considers the Gettysburg Address as the greatest of closing arguments and explains his reasoning. Rizer believes Lincoln's co-counsel in the Gettysburg Address as Thomas Jefferson, who in writing the Declaration of Independence changed the condition of mankind on a global scale. Lincoln's writings and speeches did much the same.

Although Lincoln had critics in his time, for example the Chicago Times called the Gettysburg Address, "silly, flat, disheveled utterances" p 177.

The Declaration was a promise to the nation and Lincoln upheld what the Declaration stood for and the hope for mankind. Very thought-provoking; you will "see" Lincoln in a special light after reading this book.