

Rediscovering Civil War Classics

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Feature Essay

REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS

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Watkins, Sam and Inge, M. Thomas. *REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS: Company Aytch: Or, A Side Show of the Big Show.* Plume/Penguin-Putnam, ISBN 452281245

For the most powerful Civil War memoir by a general, turn to President Grant. For the most distinctive memoir by a citizen soldier, turn to Sam Watkins. Both can tell you a thing or two about war and soldiering, madness and sadness -- and much more.

In this standing column of **Civil War Book Review**, I will advocate either the reprinting of a Civil War classic, fiction or nonfiction, or I will review a current reprint. To suggest the kinds of books I tend to recommend, I will say that one of my favorite projects as director of the United States Civil War Center was to urge publishers to reprint Civil War classics.

This journal's premiere issue featured my review of *Secessionists and Other Scoundrels: Selections from Parson Brownlow's Book*, which I persuaded Louisiana State University Press to reprint. Also at my suggestion, they have reprinted John William DeForest's novel *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty* and his two memoirs of Civil War and Reconstruction: *Alexander Stephen's Prison Diary*, and *Thirty Years After* by artist Edwin Forbes. Other works I have recommended for reprint that I can now recommend here are: Robert Penn Warren's novel *Wilderness* (University of Tennessee Press); Fletcher Pratt's *Short History of the Civil War* (Dover); *Coat of Blue, Coat of Gray* (Pelican), a novel for children; and *The Wave*, a novel by Evelyn Scott (University Press of Virginia).

I will never, I hope, need to advocate reprinting the *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant* (Modern Library, \$15.95, ISBN 0375752285). Watkins's beloved memoir (in print since 1962, at least) would need no advocate either, were it not

for M. Thomas Inge's detective work, which turned up six published, forgotten, and uncollected articles by Watkins which cannot be found in the few other editions in print. These articles and the other major embellishments Inge has included in this new edition -- an introduction, a textual note, a chronology, "A Concise History of the First Tennessee Infantry Regiment," a glossary, a topical index, a geographic index, and a biographical directory and index -- offered stellar competition against the existing editions and more than enough justification for my urging Plume to publish it and for my choosing to recommend it here.

Sam Watkins was only 41 when he started publishing installments of his memoirs in his hometown newspaper in Columbia, Tennessee, in 1881. His memory was sharp and so was his tongue. The more he tells about his experiences as a lowly private in the side show of the big show, the more disgusted we become with the officers' performances in the big tent ("a fitting burlesque to tragic scenes"). The show business metaphor is only one of an arsenal of rhetorical devices Watkins employs. In recounting 150 distinct episodes, from Shiloh, Corinth, Perryville, Knoxville, Murfreesboro, Chickamauga, Missionary Ridge, the Hundred Days Battles, Resaca, Atlanta, Franklin, and Nashville to war's end -- a fast-paced tour of major battles in both the Western and the Eastern campaigns -- Watkins moves with convincing ease from satire to pathos, from invective to laudation, from ridicule to compassion, from sarcasm to lyricism, from near-farce to black humor, from acid anecdote to trenchant generalization, from gory image to rhapsodic flights, and from excoriation of political and religious orators to exhortations of Divine Justice.

Watkins's prose is a veritable repository of rhetorical devices, from literary allusions to salty sayings to satirical punning. Have a sample or two: "Keep up that feint movement until all the boys faint from sheer exhaustion." "We found the guard," eleven men, "hard frozen as the icicles that hung from their hands and faces and clothing." Readers may be reminded of Twain's Southwestern tall tales, of Bierce's bizarre incidents, and of the picaresque novels of Fielding and Defoe. A master of Southern oral storyteller's style and Victorian literary style, Watkins meshes both.

To test one's ability to resist such richness, one might stand and read in a bookstore such brief episodes as "A Night Among the Dead," "Ten Men Killed at the Mourners' Bench," and "The Death of Tom Tuck's Rooster." Not to mention "Eating Rats."

Too many memoirists seem passive witnesses. Watkins is an active participant. Getting wounded, being captured, escaping, and then almost drowning on a sinking steamboat are only a few of his misadventures. Need I mention that he has a girl at home and more than one away from home? He does things he is ashamed to admit. But he is unflinchingly honest about the catch-22 insanity of the military system in that "long and unholy and uncalled for war": "I shrink from butchery." But about the execution of a deserter, who asks to drink rain water from his grave and who curses everybody and everything, Watkins say, flatly, "I felt he deserved to die."

With his many references to then and now and his shifts from past to present tense, Watkins creates a sense of several time dimensions existing simultaneously. "Whit thought he was killed, but he is living yet." The sense of painful immediacy the reader may feel derives partly from Watkins's compulsion to talk directly to his fellow veterans and to all who were not. "Farewell, friend: we will meet over yonder," he writes to his dead comrade. "Reader mine, did you live in that stormy period?" He makes repeated allusions to the act of writing: "I lay down my pen; I can write no more; my heart is too full. This is the saddest chapter I ever wrote." And to the act of reading: "as you are now reading these lines."

He often compares himself and other common soldiers with The Generals. "The generals risked their reputations, the private soldier his life." With bitter irony, he declares: "I shot only at privates." He often compares himself, as a small town newspaper memoirist, with historians. "I know nothing of the battle. See the histories for that. I only write from memory." But his experiences will seem to most readers far richer than that of the generals, maybe even Grant and Lee included. As for the historians, for over a century few have failed to draw, when appropriate -- and it often is -- on his testimony.

"I only tell what I saw," he admits, making no claim to historic fact. But the overriding fact is that what he didn't see or hear or know, what he misperceived, what he imagined, and, above all, the extraordinary power of the words he chose to express -- all that -- was as much a part of the history as any congeries of facts. A Bayeux tapestry of the Civil War would be woven of facts and figments, just as every history book is.

The only thing better than the Watkins millions have loved is more of the same, those six unknown articles and those enhancements with which Professor Inge has blessed us.

The United States Civil War Center grew out of David Madden's research for his Civil War novel Sharpshooter. The Center's founding director, Madden recently resigned that position to devote more time to a new novel set on ancient London Bridge during civil war, plague, and fire.

An abridged version of this column appears in the Fall 1999 print edition of **Civil War Book Review**.