

The Final Campaign: Confederate Defeat And The Corrosion Of Spirit

Tom G. Wicker

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Review

THE FINAL CAMPAIGN

Confederate defeat and the corrosion of spirit

Wicker, Tom G.

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Golay, Michael *A Ruined Land: The End of the Civil War*. John Wiley & Sons, ISBN 471183679

A reviewer should never criticize an author for not writing the book the reviewer would have written on the same subject. A reviewer may point out what he knows to be omissions and misinterpretations, of course, even claim superior knowledge -- but the *author's* book is before him, not some other imagined or preferred work. That book and its author deserve the reviewer's best judgment, not the mere substitution of his own ideas.

At risk of violating this precept, I confess that **A Ruined Land** is not the book I expected when I opened it. The fault was in me. I was misled by the title and, not far into the text, by the epigraph to Part Two (from *Absalom! Absalom!* by William Faulkner): "It was winter soon and already soldiers were beginning to come back -- the stragglers, not all of them tramps, ruffians, but men who had risked and lost everything, suffered beyond endurance and had returned now to a ruined land, not the same men who had marched away but transformed."

This (and perhaps the memory of Faulkner's masterwork) caused me to jump to the conclusion that I would read about the *aftermath*, rather than the immediate end of the war, and to anticipate a broadly conceived description of a South laid waste, of grandees reduced to hoeing their own rows, great houses burned, fields idle and overgrown, the remains of a decimated male population struggling to survive in new and unwelcome conditions, and the depredations of carpetbaggers and Ku Kluxers alike. This was a devastated society forced to accept foreign ways and customs, its own having been demolished even as its values largely persisted -- and I expected perhaps a state-by-state survey of the economic and environmental and social destruction war had wrought below Mason's and Dixon's line, description of how victors and vanquished coped, or

did not, with entirely novel situations (Negroes camped on, and refusing to move from, former masters' lands); above all, how those who had been masters and slaves reacted to a world turned upside down -- though not entirely.

An anecdotal, even chatty account

All or most of this, indeed, is in Michl Golay's superbly researched book, which is confined primarily to 1865 and 1866 with, at the end, a rather abrupt leap forward to 1876. It is not, however, the great overview I expected (an expectation Golay was under no obligation to fulfill; he was writing *his* book, not mine). Rather, it is an anecdotal, even chatty account (annoyingly sprinkled with first names of persons the reader is expected to recognize even after they have been long absent from the story) of numerous loosely connected events.

The book includes, for instance, William Sherman's march through Georgia and the Carolinas; the abortive "peace" arranged between Sherman and Joseph E. Johnston (not after Appomattox, but after the last battle of the War in the East, at Bentonville, North Carolina); the assassination of Abraham Lincoln; the Booth manhunt and killing; and the trial and hanging of the other supposed conspirators. (During this discussion we learn a great deal not everyone will want to know about Lew Wallace, later the author of *Ben Hur* but here one of the judges in the courts-martial of the conspirators, and of Henry Wirz, the commander of the Confederate death camp at Andersonville.) The book also recounts Andrew Johnson's ill-fated "swing around the circle" during the elections of 1866; the imprisonment of General Richard Ewell (an interesting but second-rank Confederate); and the Grand Review of Sherman's army along Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington after the guns were stilled.

In view of the grab bag nature of Golay's account, it is rather surprising, but welcome, that he dwells only lightly on the flight, capture, and imprisonment of Jefferson Davis -- a story elsewhere told all too often -- and on the impeachment and acquittal of Andrew Johnson, events now familiar to the modern reader owing to the ordeals of Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton. Actually, about as much of Golay's story takes place in Washington or the North or in the Union army as in the ruined land of the title.

That ruination -- real, terrible, and more enduring than non-Southerners may realize -- is described mostly in the author's chosen anecdotal method, through the stories of numerous defeated and dispossessed but often defiant Southerners

-- LeContes, Manigaults, Elliotts, and of course Wade Hampton, without whom no account of "redemption" would be acceptable.

Golay devotes much attention, in fact, to Hampton's virtual fief -- South Carolina -- which was not only the fire-eating leader of secession among the Confederate states, but also the state that first underwent "reconstruction" efforts because the Union conquered its coastal lowlands in the first year of the War. But was South Carolina necessarily more interesting as a war-ruined land than, say, Mississippi or Tennessee? Golay points out, almost in passing, that Georgia was "redeemed" (by Democrats, from a so-called "carpetbag government") more quickly than was South Carolina, but he does not tell us why or how.

After a relatively slow start, **A Ruined Land** is consistently interesting and usually even-handed, though it is not hard to see that Golay has a more instinctive sympathy for the often-obstreperous freedmen than for those who only reluctantly yielded ownership of slaves (as late as the South Carolina constitutional convention in burned-over Columbia in 1866, with the Confederacy defeated and readmission to the Union at stake, some delegates actively opposed the abolition of slavery!). And it may well be that the sweeping overview of a "ruined land" that I expected actually is as familiar a story -- at least to Michl Golay -- as that of Jeff Davis in flight or Andrew Johnson on trial, while the personal and family histories that Golay scatters through his book are fresh and more telling of the Southern experience of defeat than any conventional history.

Failure in battle is unique in our history. Defeat in Vietnam was devastating -- but far away and impersonal, except to the relative few who suffered direct loss. In fact, no Americans other than the white Southerners who survived the Civil War suffered military defeat so complete, social upheaval so widespread, economic reversal so disastrous, and environmental destruction so devastating. One of the childhood sights graven in my memory is the ruined stone walls of a factory burned by Sherman's bummers, and I often heard how my grandmother picked up kernels of corn from the ground where a Yankee cavalry horse had dropped them -- her family had nothing else to eat. All Southerners of my generation, and some even younger, have heard and seen such things -- often more horrendous.

That is perhaps the primary reason why the South is "different." Southerners have known defeat -- if not personally, then in the blood. **A Ruined Land** --

despite some none-too-relevant divergences and a chronology sometimes difficult to follow, and perhaps because of its focus on individuals and their stories -- lends that fundamental Southern fact the immediacy and reality of endured experience. We can sense, in Michl Golay's telling, the terror and disbelief caused by the burning of Columbia, the weariness, hunger, and despair signaling a lost war and a shattered life, and the helpless anger of people whose values (profound, if wrong-headed) were scorned, and whose true home -- the land of the heart -- was as ruined as their cotton fields.

Tom G. Wicker was a reporter and columnist for the New York Times from 1960 to 1991. Author of Civil War novel Unto This Hour and 13 other books, he lives in Vermont.