

Civil War Book Review

Winter 2000

Article 28

Feature Essay

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Recommended Citation

Madden, David (2000) "Feature Essay," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 .
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol2/iss1/28>

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Dabney, Virginius *REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS: The Story of Don Miff: A Symphony of Life.*

Here comes one Civil War novel after another - and you wish something new would come along. Well, here it is: *The Story of Don Miff, As Told by His Friend, John Bouche Whacker, A Symphony of Life*, "edited" by Virginius Dabney. The title makes you think you know what you're in for but what you get is something you'd never dream of. New in what way, you do well to ask. New in conception and execution. **Don Miff** was then -- and remains -- unique, in Southern, indeed American, fiction. *Don Miff* is more like *Pride and Prejudice* on the right hand and *Tristram Shandy* on the left than like *The Killer Angels* or *Cold Mountain*.

If any American were to conceive of a satirical Civil War novel 20 years after Appomattox, it would be one by an independent-minded Virginian living in New York City. If ever a subject needed a dose of Dabney, the Civil War is it. Satire that bites. Humor that, line by line, delights. The novel went through four printings in six months.

Of course, publishers might balk at the prospect of inserting the four foldout sheets of music from Beethoven's "Eroica" Symphony that mark off the four movements of the novel. But they will imagine the enormous delight readers will take in the satire promised in Dabney's cautionary preface: "The way" that John Bouche Whacker, 300-pound physician and bachelor and Dabney's invention, of course, "sails into...everything and everybody quite takes my breath away. Lawyers, military men, professors and students, parsons, agnostics, statesmen, billiard-players, novelists, poetesses, saints and sinners." Later, Whacker himself warns that, "I never attack the main body. But let a feeble, emaciated, and worn-out little lie, or a blustering, braggart fraud, or a conceited, coxcombical sham, stray to the right or left, or get belated on the march. I pounce upon him like an owl upon a field-mouse."

Justification enough for reprinting the novel -- something that I urge publishers to consider -- is Dr. Whacker's 44-page introduction, which masquerades as Chapter I to deceive women readers, impatient, like the heroine, to follow the story of the mysterious, romantic stranger who appears in Richmond under the name John Smith (until a child mispronounces it as Don Miff). Ranging far back and far forward in time, Whacker spares nobody, neither illustrious ancestors nor hypothetical descendants. Writing the mock biography of Don Miff for and directly to his descendant five centuries hence, whom he imagines will be Chinese, Whacker makes witty observations on a vast array of Western Civilization's follies, injecting suddenly a very dramatic episode of the Civil War.

From his depiction of the upper class domestic and social life of 1860 Richmond that Virginians waged war to protect, Dabney makes a leap into 1864. Of the 492 pages and 80 chapters only about 71 pages and a few chapters are devoted to the War itself, but those pages benefit from comparison with John William De Forest, Ambrose Bierce, and other masters of Civil War narrative. Like his West Tennessee counterpart, Sam Watkins, whose witty, sometimes satirical, sometimes lyrical, often brutally frank memoir, *Company Aytch* [reviewed here in Fall 1999 *CWBR*], appeared four years earlier, Dabney fought in the War.

Whacker advises his reader to skip Chapter XXVIII in which he embarks upon a disquisition on slavery. He often pauses to remark upon the problems of writing the narrative itself. On page 341, he satirizes the novelist's creation of his characters, inviting the heroine to write her own audience-pleasing chapter.

Among Dabney's other Shandian devices are: letters; very brief chapters; footnotes; poems; digressions; sudden bursts of florid rhetoric; literary, historical, and religious allusions; and omitted passages, indicated by ellipses. The rendering of narrative is leisurely, but Dabney's witty style, full of subtle intimations, conveys a sustained sense of a singularly appealing sensibility, imagination, and intellect. Unfortunately, we may enjoy that style in only one other book, *Gold That Did Not Glitter* (1889). Dabney died at age 59.