

Rediscovering Civil War Classics

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Feature Essay

REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS

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Glasgow, Ellen *REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS: The Battle-Ground and Manassas*. University of Alabama Press, ISBN 081731041X

Ironically, the still-read works of Ellen Glasgow do not generally cry out for rediscovery, while Upton Sinclair, one of the best-known American novelists throughout the world and author of *The Jungle*, wrote a novel that has had to cry out for rediscovery. The University of Alabama Press heard that voice and in response has inaugurated a new series, Classics in Civil War Fiction, with the publication of **Manassas** by Sinclair and **The Battle-Ground** by Glasgow.

The two novels and their authors make for startling comparisons and contrasts. Glasgow lived in Richmond most of her life and set many of her novels there, including **The Battle-Ground**, in which the themes of her multi-volumed "social history" of Virginia were introduced. She was born in 1873, five years before Sinclair was born of southern parents in Baltimore. She died at the age of 73; Sinclair at 90. None of Glasgow's novels was as famous as Sinclair's *The Jungle*, an expose of unsafe and unhealthy conditions in Chicago's stockyards that inspired the 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act.

Both won Pulitzer Prizes: Glasgow in 1941 for her Modern South novel *In This Our Life*, Sinclair the following year for his anti-Nazi novel *Dragon's Teeth*. Frequent candidate on the Socialist ticket in California, Sinclair wrote 80 books, most of them novels and nonfiction, the purpose of which was to inspire action for social justice by exposing various aspects of the macrocosm of American culture (alcoholism, religion, education) and the evils of war and of the oil, coal, and steel industries. Glasgow, the aristocratic daughter of a Confederate cannon manufacturer, confined herself, in her fewer years of writing, to the microcosm of Virginia, delineating the social consequences for women and blacks of the Civil War and Reconstruction and of class conflict in modern southern culture. **Battle-Ground** appeared in 1902, **Manassas** in 1904. One may wonder whether

Sinclair and Glasgow knew or read each other.

The introductions to Sinclair's novel, by Kent Gramm, and to Glasgow's novel, by Susan Goodman, show how those novels evolved out of and prepare for their authors' other works, and how they reflected American culture and have continued to affect it.

While not hesitating to point out the 'sthetic flaws in Sinclair's novel, common to all his fiction, Gramm makes a forceful case for the importance of **Manassas** as an anti-slavery novel whose heroine is the United States herself. It was the first in an unfinished trilogy, the second novel of which is the anti-wage slavery novel, *The Jungle*. **Manassas** delineates the moral phenomenon of the War, as its hero, a young Mississippi slave owner, is persuaded by the founder of the Underground Railroad and moved by Frederick Douglass's speeches to free his slaves and fight for the union.

Goodman's introduction enables us to see the effect upon Glasgow's readers and upon other southern writers of her deliberate anti-romantic realism and her artistry in rendering the lives of people in all walks of life before and during the War. Her hero and heroine struggle over more than the privations of lovers as they act out their drama in the home place as well as on the battlefield. But the essence of her novel is the metaphorical battle-ground where social and cultural values clash by night and by day and the firing does not cease in April 1865. Generally considered one of the greatest Civil War novels, **Battle-Ground** may not cry out for rediscovery, but it must always be in print, especially with an introduction as useful and richly insightful as Goodman's.

David Madden is Donald and Velvia Crumbley Professor of Creative Writing at Louisiana State University. While researching and writing his Civil War novel, Sharpshooter (1996), he created The United States Civil War Center. With David Rachels, he is co-editor of the University of Alabama Press's new series, Classics of Civil War Fiction, in which the novels reviewed in this issue's column are published.