The Moral Equivalent Of War

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'The moral equivalent of war'

War is fought on many fronts, only one of which is martial and even then is not self-interpreting. Disputes over the moral justification, philosophical meaning, and historical legacy of war prove just as contentious. Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, for example, did more than transform the ambiguous military outcome of Antietam into a Union triumph; it infused the Civil War with a new purpose.

Soldiers on the march or in the skirmish lines have a different perspective on war. For Captain Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., Antietam's significance was intensely personal: wounded severely at that creek, Holmes recovered his health but never regained his idealism. In The Metaphysical Club, Louis Menand argues that Holmes's generation "wished to bring ideas and principles and beliefs down to a human level because they wished to avoid the violence they saw hidden in abstractions. This was one of the lessons the Civil War had taught them."

Menand's book has focused, almost singularly, on the connection it draws between the Civil War and the subsequent development of Pragmatism. This philosophy, which sought to counter the influence of German idealism, is commonly associated with William James, Charles S. Peirce, and John Dewey. These men, like Holmes, took their first breaths in a New England culture where the spirit of Transcendentalism lingered in the air. The Civil War changed everything. After 1865, Emersonian introspection lost ground to Hegelian progressivism and Darwinian materialism. The Gilded Age's economic
dynamicism and social strife coincided with political change as immigration and western expansion diminished New England's national influence. Menand contends that Pragmatism sought to make sense of this chaotic world.

The Metaphysical Club takes its name from a shorthived discussion group of philosophers and civic leaders in Boston organized in 1872. Holmes and James were among the participants, as was Chauncey Wright, who served as an inspiration to the others. Menand wishes to suggest the fraternal spirit with which Holmes, James, Peirce, and Dewey served as fountainheads of new legal and philosophic thought. Indeed, the individual men had varying degrees of affection for one another, and Holmes and Dewey felt mutual dislike.

After presenting chapters that trace the ancestries and early lives of the four men, the book turns discursive, addressing such topics as the professionalization of higher education, probability theory, and polygenesis and Darwinism. As the pages turn, the quirks and crusades of Holmes, James, Peirce, and Dewey unfold. Menand achieves admirable clarity in his treatment of technical subjects, even if it becomes strained at times (e.g., William James "was a Darwinian, but he was not a Darwinist"). The result is a sprawling account of postwar northern intellectual life.

Although only Holmes had soldiered in the late war, two younger brothers of James were Union enlistees, as was Dewey's father. Menand detects the latent memory of the Civil War in subsequent events: in Holmes's praise of professionalism and James's use of military metaphors, in public apprehension that labor agitation might plunge the country into a new crisis, and especially in the overriding moral that Holmes and the others drew from the war, "that certitude leads to violence." But the specter of war remained. Holmes died with two bloodstained uniforms hanging in his closet, and James wrote a now-famous essay, shortly before his death, asking how peaceful societies might inspire manliness and virtue in those untested by military contest. This was an unnecessary fear, as the outbreak of World War I soon would demonstrate.

This issue marks the debut of a regular column by Morgan N. Knull, who is assuming the title of contributing editor to CWBR. He can be reached by email at mnknull@eatel.net.