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Editorial

BETWEEN HISTORY AND FICTION

Ng, Laura

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Unfortunately fiction and history, both the products of our contemplation, compilation, and creativity, have not always been happy bedfellows. Historians fear that writers will abandon all facts, as William Faulkner seems to advocate: "I don't care much for facts, am not much interested in them, you can't stand a fact up, you've got to prop it up, and when you move to one side a little and look at it from that angle, it's not thick enough to cast a shadow in that direction." How much "propping" a writer should do is open to debate. On the other hand, writers tend to see history as a long laundry list of dull facts crying out for interpretation and imagination.

How do we bridge the gap? We asked four distinguished individuals, Herman Hattaway, Josephine Humphreys, Louis Masur, and David Madden, to give us their opinions on this complex relationship. Their insights and experiences reveal the relationship between history and fiction as that of long lost brothers rather than a mirror of the cold conflict of North versus South.

In our mindscapes we create our own balance of history and fiction, attaching opinions and possibilities to the events of our lives. We create a collective crazy quilt of happenstance and circumstance that when exchanged with and accepted by others becomes "public memory." But before memory can be public, it must be private. In this issue's "Rediscovering Civil War Classics," guest columnist James I. Robertson Jr. examines the personal history of Henry Nelson Blake through his memoir, *Three Years in the Army of the Potomac* (Lee and Shepherd, 1865).

Between the last battles of war and the first struggles of Reconstruction, troops on both sides demobilized and began their long journeys home. Terrence Winschel reviews *Homeward Bound* by William B. Holberton (Stackpole Books, ISBN 0811707881, \$24.95 hardcover), and uncovers the transition from soldier and citizen, a time when reflection first transformed Civil War history into myth. The harsh light of fact drives tragic elements of history, such as slavery, from the

shadows. Public memory then molds the myths and sentimentality that we continue to attach to the Civil War today. *The Reel Civil War* by Bruce Chadwick (Alfred A. Knopf, ISBN 0375409181, \$27.50, hardcover) and *Fiction as Fact* by Neil Longley York (Kent State University Press, ISBN 0873386884, \$18.00, softcover), reviewed in this issue, analyze how Hollywood's manipulation of fact and fiction has created products for national consumption.

It is clear that Faulkner's claimed aversion to "facts" is intended to convey the idea that history is a set of perspectives. When we shift positions, new perspectives unfold before us. In these hidden areas lives fiction and possibility, ripe for harvesting. These new perspectives inspire work such as: *Lee in the Shadow of Washington* by Richard B. McCaslin (Louisiana State University Press, ISBN 0807126969, \$29.95, hardcover) a nonfiction exploration of Lee as the heir to a Revolutionary legend; *Exile in Richmond* (University Press of Virginia, ISBN 0813920183, \$35.00, hardcover) and *A Prussian Observes the American Civil War* (University of Missouri Press, ISBN 0826213480, \$34.95 hardcover) that each reveal how the war appeared from the outside; and David Poyer's novel, *Fire on the Waters* (Simon & Schuster, ISBN 0684871335, \$25.00, hardcover) that illustrates that the war from the inside, from the imagination, is best captured in fiction.

We cannot, and should not, separate history and fiction. History inspires our imaginations, pushes us to look beyond the surface of fact and to creatively explore facets of the past that reflect upon our nation and ourselves. The books that range the spectrum from scholarly replication of facts to imagined possibilities offer valuable points of view into our past. From our perspective, these fresh insights and ideas promise better scholarship. What do they look like from yours?

-Laura Ng