

A Meditation: Essays Question The Meaning Of War

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Review

A MEDITATION

Essays question the meaning of war

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Gramm, Kent *Somebody's Darling: Essays on the Civil War*. Indiana University Press, \$29.95 ISBN 253340810

Few of the writers have done so well at asking the truly hard questions about the Civil War as has Kent Gramm, whose compelling *Somebody's Darling: Essays on the Civil War* approaches the masterful achievement of Robert Penn Warren's *The Legacy Civil War* as a meditation on what the War meant and still means in the collective American psyche and soul.

Gramm, whose degrees include a Master of Divinity from Princeton, does not flinch from questioning God's ways to man. Gramm often carries on a Melville-like quarrel with God over the essential question of Why? He also questions our own motives those of us who, frankly, love the war. To understand the Civil War intellectually is one thing; it is a theoretical, political, moral, abstract thing. But to experience what it was like is another thing. He considers the nearly incomprehensible prominence of the war on our cultural landscape, yet he focuses on the war's impact on individual lives. The Civil War is not merely the sum of events; rather, it is a moral phenomenon, a product of human agency with moral consequences.

Gramm's post-Edenic vision attempts both to find meaning in the war and to refute the myths and self-congratulatory platitudes with which we comfort ourselves. He challenges even the cherished belief that the Civil War was divinely ordained and therefore a cleansing spiritual surgery. Questioning the theodicy of the war, he paraphrases William Blake in asking, What hand and what art dare frame war's fearful symmetry? Gramm proposes that the Civil War had its heroes, but heroes are not men on battlefields, they are written things that heroism and the nobility of warriors are rhetorical constructs.

Gramm also considers cultural phenomena such as battle reenactments, films, and other commodifications of history. *Somebody's Darling*, which provides the book's title, critically evaluates the film *Gettysburg* and how it has shaped our views of the war, mostly for ill. From the diminishing that Lee's character suffers in Martin Sheen's hands to the overfed and middle-aged reenactor extras, Gramm spares few of the film's incongruities. He wonders at the absence of gore to show graphically what really happened. In spite of his assessment that what the movie lacks in realism, it makes up for in error, Gramm relates a young student's first experience with the film, who is touched with grief at the genuine human pathos, something that we scholars have forgotten how to do.

Further, Gramm cites part of the *Bhaga-vad-Gita*, essentially a war tale. Lord Krishna surveys the battle scene; sickened by the thought of killing his kinsmen, his fellow humans, he lays down his arms. Arguing that the *Gita* both glorifies and repudiates war, Gramm, in *The Song of God*, explores the paradox of why we love to reenact, review, and otherwise commemorate an event that horrifies us. Why stage the morbid celebration of battle reenactments, much like the ancient Greek funeral games? Why is the imaginative appeal of the war is so strong? The concluding thought in *Witnesses*, as in many of these essays, is an uncomfortable one: that in our zeal to study the war and revel in its drama and sweep, we imbue it with nostalgia, dignity, a terrible beauty and forget that the battlefield was a slaughter, and that the dead Rebel in the *Sunken Road* was *Somebody's Darling*.

In "The *Gettysburg* that Nobody Knows", Gramm points out that the historically verifiable facts of the battle bring us knowledge, but no wisdom. The personal value of an individual soldier's life is what is relevant if we are to attain unto human knowledge and understanding. Indeed, Gramm gently chides history for its inability to delve into the weightier matters of the law: Fate, Mercy, Compassion, Grief, Life after Death, and whether God is really in His heaven after all. We do not understand the sacrament of our own blood . . . nor do we know whether believing in its significance is faith or delusion.

Wilderness is one of the book's cornerstones and offers the Wilderness battles as metaphor, even allegory, for the chaotic nature of war and for the elusiveness of epistemological certitude: that the clearings in the forest, a succession of relatively clean, well-lighted places, punctuate the impenetrable woods like a stuttered sentence through the sunless confusion. These clearings

gave the troops in them a false sense of clarity and orientation . . . but they were isolated, and they were at the mercy of whatever happened in the tangles left and right of them. Thus it is with conventional history. We can only construe from what we see. He cites Heisenberg and the uncertainty principle and the impossibility of predicting events. The Wilderness demands humility; in it, the mighty can be weak and the audacious set to naught.

”The Real War” and “Nothing but Omnipotence” both further explore the problem of history and narrative and how, in Walt Whitman's words, the real war will never get in the books. This is not to say that historians are fools only that the limits of traditional scholarship cannot explain the intricacies of the human heart. Also, the facts about the war and what it means change with each generation of historians.

If it exists at all today, the real Civil War exists in imaginations. Whatever connects America's waking dream, its nightmare of the 1860s, and that is our means of getting some stray glimpses of that war. The means are song and story, images, strange things, dreamlike things, things to lead us now and then to nightmare.

”The Road to Gettysburg”, a long poem, echoes many themes from the essays, including the deception of cultural tradition:

Both armies sought the felon dignity
of triumph as they passed along their ways,
for killers masquerade in history
as saints, and poets lie because a lie
is prettier than death. . . .

The poem is reminiscent of Whitman, Owen, and especially Tate's “Ode to the Confederate Dead”, in its poignant contemplations of war's sacrifice, whether it came to aught, and what we all may have lost as a result.

His Epilogue: *Les Terribles* honors a neighbor and friend, a World War II veteran named Dick Benson. Gramm speculates on the paradox of fundamentally decent men, as American troops usually seemed to be, who could take part in an

indecent task and yet struggle the rest of their lives to bear the burden. But this is a distinctly positive note to end on, that the goodness in the hearts of men may outlast the horrors that they sometimes are compelled to witness.

Gramm's writing weaves in influences from Shakespeare to Yeats and from Thoreau to Hemingway, enriching his prose with multi-layered depth. His fluency with the abstract does not save him from occasional obscurity, however. There is a Zen-like approach to structure that can leave the reader wandering. Linking image and idea together with an almost metaphysical facility, however, Gramm treats his subject with humor and verve as well as awe and piety.

This collection is a must-read for anyone who ever cared about the Civil War and its significance in the life of the human mind and spirit. It will be, or ought to be, one of the indispensable classics in this field.

Gramm does not pretend to have all of the answers, or even to know how to get them. But he has, with eloquence and incisive power, identified the most crucial and urgent questions.

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