

# Civil War Book Review

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## Feature Essay

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## Feature Essay

Fall 2003

**Madden, David** *REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS: O. Henry's Civil War Surprises.*

### Rediscovering Civil War Classics

#### O. Henry's Civil War Surprises

Perhaps I should rename this column Discovering and Rediscovering Civil War Classics. Thomas Wolfe had never been called a Civil War writer until I made that claim in this column about a year ago. As a direct result of that column, *Thomas Wolfe's Civil War* will be published by the University of Alabama Press in the fall of 2004. To stimulate the reprinting of a rediscovered classic is one of the major purposes of this column. But you cannot rediscover that which has never been discovered. Here now is another surprise: O. Henry was a Civil War short story writer. And only here has that label ever been slapped on his work. Nor has he ever been called primarily a Southern writer, although a few thousand of his millions of readers over the past century worldwide know that he was born and raised in the South. Neither has anyone, *Cabbages and Kings* in hand, fudged a little to call him a South American writer. Forty years ago, however, he was called a western, a Texas writer, based mostly on his collection *Hearts of the West*, and augmented by a new collection of the other westerns. *The Gentle Grafters* collection makes calling him a prison writer, in the tradition of Cervantes, easy. Peeling labels make labeling a risky business, so I wouldn't do it were it not for the lamentable fact that his well-sustained, century-long reputation is founded firmly upon the stories in such volumes as *The Four Million*, *Strictly Business*, and *The Voice of the City*.

It is a distorted tribute to O. Henry that his reputation as one of the international masters of the short story--in the Boccaccio-du Mauppsant mode--rests monumentally on the tales set in New York City. Over nearly a century, O. Henry's major achievement has been considered to be his unique way of depicting life among the lowly in Manhattan as in "The Gift of the Magi," his

most often reprinted story. But only about half of his 300 tales are set in The City of Dreadful Night. He moved there specifically to be close to editors who provided him with a living, and he sentenced himself to a grueling task of producing a story a week for the rest of his short life. About 30 of the stories are set in the South, 32 in Central and South America, and 80 in the West. Even though they are among his first, his last, and his best, his Southern stories are scattered throughout his collected volumes. The South American, the Western, and the "grafter" genres, added to the southern tales, make up over half of O. Henry's 300 stories.

"I take my pen in hand to say that I am from the South," wrote O. Henry, "and have been a stranger in New York for four years. But I know a restaurant where you can get real Corn Bread...." Alphonso Smith points out that many of his friend's stories "stage a contrast between the North and the South or the North and the West," especially in "The Rose of Dixie," "The Duplicity of Hargraves," and "Hygeia at the Solito." The narrator of "Municipal Report" says, "I desire to interpolate here that I am a Southerner. But I am not one by profession or trade.... When the orchestra plays Dixie.... I slide a little lower on the leather-cornered seat and, well, order another Wurzburger and wish that Longstreet had--but what's the use?"

O. Henry's way of depicting experiences in the South offers a new cast to our picture of Southern fiction. If we recall the O. Henry of the Southern stories, we enable readers today to see vividly an O. Henry who has been too long kept in the dark beyond city lights.

If I were assembling *O. Henry's Civil War Surprises*--and perhaps I will--the contents would include the following: The Guardian of the Accolade, Two Renegades, The Emancipation of Billy, Thimble, Thimble, The Rose of Dixie, A Municipal Report, and The Duplicity of Hargraves.

*O. Henry's Civil War Surprises* promises not only a different focus, but, for most readers, a distinctly "new" perspective on O. Henry and his tales. Frequent themes in all types of his stories are especially appropriate to fiction about the Civil War: reformation, regeneration, atonement, and rehabilitation. I use the term "Civil War" to include the Reconstruction Era, which lasted almost three times as long as the battle era. Most of O. Henry's stories are set in the era he knew first hand, Reconstruction.

I offer here an iconoclastic challenge to the legend according to which O. Henry is the Caliph of Baghdad on the Subway. I argue instead that O. Henry is fundamentally a Southern writer, all of whose fiction, including the New York tales, derives from the style and technique of the Appalachian Mountain oral tall-tale telling tradition. No matter where his stories were set--and they are set all over the United States and in several foreign countries--at the heart of each was the oral tradition of the South. The surprise ending for which he is famous is a salient feature of that tradition.

Turning to writings about O. Henry, I find that his friends, biographers, and a few critics have pointed out the importance of his North Carolina roots in general and of the influence of Southern humor in particular. But it is my own conviction that O. Henry should be regarded as first and foremost a Southern humorist of the highest caliber.

We see O. Henry most truly when we see him first learning tale telling techniques in the small, foothills town of Greensboro, North Carolina where he was born and where he lived and worked until the age of twenty, then as a young man and a family man who spent most of his adult life in the small, state capitol town of Austin, Texas. William Sydney Porter (O. Henry was his pen name) was born in 1862, on the eve of the battle of Antietam. Three years old when his mother died, he had to move with his father to his grandmother's house in the last year of the Civil War. He grew up during the Reconstruction turmoil. The tales veterans and townspeople told were colored by major differences between North Carolina and other Southern states. North Carolina, where there had been few slaves and which had reluctantly joined the Confederacy and where few battles were fought, lost 20,600 men, almost a fourth the total of Confederates killed in battle (disease claimed almost twice as many). At Gettysburg alone, 714 of North Carolina's 900 men were killed. Virginia, where most of the great battles were fought, had the next highest losses at 6,947, only a third as many as North Carolina. It was in Greensboro, where no battles were fought, that President Davis prepared his final escape from the Confederacy. Will's father worked in the military hospitals as a doctor; he became an alcoholic recluse, working on such inventions as a perpetual motion machine.

Judge Albion Tourgee, the town's most famous and suspicious carpetbagger, wrote a celebrated Reconstruction novel, set in Greensboro, *A Fool's Errand: By One of the Fools*, an expose of the Ku Klux Klan. O. Henry himself became one of the few Southern writers in his time to criticize and satirize professional

Southerners who promoted Southern aristocratic manners and pretensions about pride and honor, as we see, for instance, in "Vereton Villa, A Tale of the South" and in "A Blackjack Bargainer."

O. Henry relished listening to people talk and assumed his readers would, too. His powerful, authoritative voice as all-knowing narrator--the engagingly self-conscious voice of a creator of settings, characters, dramatic events, always with humorous overtones--evolved out of his youthful participation in the Southern tale-telling tradition. He opens "The Emancipation of Billy": "In the old, old, square-porticoed mansion, with the wry window-shutters and the paint peeling off in discolored flakes, lived one of the last of the war governors. The South has forgotten the enmity of the great conflict, but it refuses to abandon its old traditions and idols."

My contention, that as we read any of his stories we do well to think of O. Henry as a Southern writer, becomes more trenchant if we can agree that the effects of Reconstruction pervade Southern consciousness up to the present moment and that in a vital sense every work of fiction by a writer raised in the South is about the Civil War.

Although the term "the South" may embrace Texas, the claim is stronger when we note that the features of the mountain tall-tale also characterize O. Henry's western stories. It's often with surprise that one remembers that the Cisco Kid, one of the most famous Western heroes, inspiration for two silent and 23 sound movies, followed by radio and television series, is O. Henry's creation in "The Caballero's Way"; it is included in his fourth collection, *Heart of the West*, a roundup of his favorite western stories. Few readers today are aware that he wrote about half as many Westerns as New York stories. The stories in *Heart of the West*, along with his many other Westerns, offer a unique perspective on the West. O. Henry was the Mr. Scheherazade of Austin Nights long before he was called the Yankee De Maupassant.

Accused in Austin of embezzlement, O. Henry became a fugitive. His friendship down in South America with another fugitive, the notorious train robber Al Jennings, increased his stock of Western lore. A good example is "Two Renegades," set in Central America. It is also a Civil War story, involving two veterans, one a Yankee, the other a Rebel, who finally regard each other as "part human."

Finally, O. Henry surrendered. In prison, he wrote 14 other stories; more of which were set in the South than anywhere else. Two were published while he was in prison. Several others written there were published later before he arrived in Manhattan, including some of his best stories set in the South, "Georgia's Ruling," "Whistling Dick's Christmas Stocking," and "A Blackjack Bargainer."

To the end, O. Henry had the South in mind. He had outlined a series of stories about the modern South. Near death, he was planning to write his first novel at long last. "The hero' of the story will be a man born and raised' in a somnolent little Southern town."

On June 5, 1910, at the young age of 48, O. Henry died in a hospital in New York City deep in debt. At about sunrise that day, he had said, in his pronounced Southern accent, "Raise the shades. I don't want to go home in the dark."

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