

# Civil War Book Review

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## Feature Essay

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**Aaron, Daniel** *REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS: The Unwritten War*. University of Alabama Press, \$26.95 ISBN 817350020

Who wrote the unwritten war?

Whitman stirred it all up with his declaration that the real war will never get into the books. Many books and articles have been written to prove that the real war remains unwritten. One of the most provocative appeared in 1962 during the Civil War Centennial celebration — *Patriotic Gore* by Edmund Wilson. Wilson claimed and set out to demonstrate that nonfiction had served Americans better than fiction and poetry. Ten years later, Daniel Aaron's **The Unwritten War** examined the case for fiction and poetry, including Whitman's. Both Wilson and Aaron concluded that Whitman was right. The United States Civil War Center was created a decade ago on that premise.

This conviction does not presume a lack of excellent novels, poems, plays, movies, letters, memoirs, biographies, autobiographies, and battle histories, but rather it affirms that no single, monumental work in any of these, or any other genre has expressed the essence of the war with such depth, complexity, and clarity of vision that readers feel the war mesh with their own identities as Americans. Given the fact that the antebellum-war-reconstruction eras shaped, shattered, and reshaped the American character, it is understandable that Americans would look to writers to achieve what they alone cannot, as if Shakespeare had been born too early and in the wrong country.

What about *The Red Badge of Courage*? What about it? It's more about all wars and youthful courage than about the Civil War. Well, what about *Gone With the Wind*? Well, what about it? My own question is, What about *Rome Hanks* by Joseph Pennell? Rome who? is all the thanks I get. But even readers who call out the title of their choice of the greatest Civil War novel, which must be also the Great American novel, do not make the claim that it achieves the unlikely or the impossible that is implied in Whitman's declaration. Nor do I.

While we wait for the ideal Civil War work in whatever genre, a temporary and somewhat satisfying question might be, Who has written the Civil War novel as the Great American Epic? Each epoch in American history through the Civil War, from the voyages to Massachusetts and Jamestown, to the Revolution, to the war of 1812, to the Mexican-American war, has transpired on an epic scale. The epoch of the Civil War, with its long antebellum prelude and its long Reconstruction postlude, was the last in American history to produce the elements of an epic. On this question, I ask that we consider the trilogy by the father and the son, *Gods and Generals* by Jeff Shaara, *The Killer Angels* by Michl Shaara, and *The Last Full Measure* by Jeff Shaara, and, by extension, Ron Maxwell's first two movie versions of the trilogy. But action epics do not strike to the heart and soul of the matter.

To help us sort out the possibilities, any time is an excellent time to see Daniel Aaron's **The Unwritten War** back in print. Its reappearance now is a function of this column, which is to call attention to worthy reprints and to advocate, in this column or behind the scenes, that certain titles in all genres be reprinted. The University of Alabama Press, which publishes the *Classics of Civil War Fiction Series*, responded to my suggestion with lightning speed.

I had long admired Aaron's seminal study *Writers on the Left* (1961). Having **The Unwritten War** on the shelf beside *Patriotic Gore*, I felt well armed as I studied the war. Aaron takes his readers through a survey of the writings of novelists and poets, North and South, on issues leading up to and during the War; the convictions, for instance, of Emerson, Simms, Hawthorne, and Whitman, and the waffling convictions of the malingerers—Henry Adams, Henry James, Williams Dean Howells, and even Mark Twain. He also focuses on novelists who witnessed and wrote about the war and reconstruction, John William De Forest, Ambrose Bierce, and Albion W. Tourgee, and two who wrote about it second hand: Stephen Crane and Harold Frederic. Southern writers, onlookers and participants, are fully described and evaluated. His insights into the writings of Robert Penn Warren and William Faulkner, reconstructors of the Southern past, are rich and suggestive, two words that describe the achievement of the entire book. May I suggest that you do not go to the War without it.

*Founding director of the United States Civil War Center, creator of The Civil War Book Review, and co-editor with David Rachels of the Classics of*

Civil War Fiction Series, *David Madden is Donald and Velvia Crumbley Professor of Creative Writing at LSU. Sharpshooter is his Civil War novel. He is editor of two volumes in preparation: Loss of the Sultana and Reminiscences of the Survivors and Thomas Wolfe's Civil War. London Bridge Is Falling Down is a novel on which, he says, he is making good progress.*