Traditions And Transformations: Five Years Of Civil War Books

Randal Allred

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Interview

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FIVE YEARS OF CIVIL WAR BOOKS

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Interview with Dr. Randal Allred

by Christopher S. Freeman

Randal Allred is associate professor of English at Brigham Young University Hawaii, where he also directs the Honors Program. He is currently writing a book on Civil War literature and is beginning another on battle reenactments.

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Over the last five years, what trends have you observed in Civil War Era literature? Do any hold any particular promise or are you troubled by any of these recent trends?

Randal Allred (RA): Since Cold Mountain, I think that there is more room for the Civil War novel that goes deep into the inner life of the character, and into the folkways of the period's culture and lifestyles (as opposed to the combat epic and romance novel that dominated Civil War fiction of old and still does, in sheer volume). In fact, the war is conspicuous in Cold Mountain mostly by its absence. It does not disappear—in fact, is hovering heavily in the wings at every turn of the plot—but other than a few flashbacks in the mind of Inman, we do not get any front line action. What we have instead is the history of the heart, firmly set in the context of the ghastly changes the war had wrought upon the landscape, physical and spiritual. We have the destruction and mutation in people's lives, far from the battle front, reverberations felt to the farthest corners of the country—one of Cold Mountain's main points being that it is one of the farthest corners, which is why Inman moves toward it so resolutely, in a bid to remember who he is and to recover some possibly still-living core of himself, there on his home ground. It is a classic journey of return and redemption, and in
spite of the ghastly ending of Inman's life, most readers are uplifted by what they see as the resiliency of the human spirit in the midst of death and disaster, the refusal to bow to despair, cynicism, and opportunistic and casual violence. Cold Mountain is more than an action piece or romance: it is epic, vital, and somehow makes the Civil War everyman's war. I realize that this novel is a little older than 5 years, but it began a positive trend, I believe, in treating the war seriously in fiction.

I see something similar in Jacob's Ladder, which may be the best Civil War novel I have ever read. This novel fully explores the world of the camp and battlefield, and the impact of warfare on the lives of the people. Yet it is also a close examination of the folkways of the South, without cliché or stereotype. Donald McCaig here is able to do what few novelists have done—to provide a wide-scope microcosm of the War in one story without seams, cracks, and contrived plot connections. We have the story of the Gatewood family, painted in life-like and frank colors, with both the white and black sides of their story, without tokenism or sentimental didacticism or punitive retrospective workshops on race relations woven clumsily into the text. The Gatewoods are typical and ordinary and yet extraordinary at the same time. They have mighty hearts and very human failings. For Duncan is a white planter's son enraged at his father for separating him forcefully from his octoroon slave lover and for him to espouse the Confederate cause with a fervency that is startling as it is hypocritical, is an irony so profound that it is painful: as vivid and piercing an allegory of the white South's paradoxical relationship with the black race as anyone has ever tried. Both white and black are attached by the closest bonds, yet distrust one another and hate what the peculiar institution does to natural human love and loyalty. Duncan hates the slave system, and yet like many other Southerners, is nearly psychotically defensive of any attack on the system.

We find ourselves as readers caring deeply for the white and black characters alike, finding both to be as crucial to the development of the story as the other, and finding the great irony that both racial communities find that their lives are tied up together, inseparably. There is complexity and multi-dimensional substance in an astonishing large percentage of the person dramatis, from Jack the Driver (whose personal stake in Stratford, the Gatewood's farm, has him more interested in getting it back into full production, than in emancipation) to Midge/Maggie/Marguerite changing her race and name (in an ironic sense, the perfect self-made American character), to Alexander Kirkpatrick, the shallow scholar whose white Northern heritage leaves no moral
nor ethical support for his life. We have Jesse Burns, who is both inwardly scarred and yet full of hope—who, like Frasier's Inman, sees the horror and the inhumanity, but refuses to give in to despair. We have Catesby Byrd, apathetic and yet sensitive, a mess of contradictions, who does not have the passion for the Cause, and yet serves more loyally than any in the war that destroys him. We have Opal, the slave woman who had more authority and plucky enterprise in her than any white person in the book. Sallie Botkin finds her own path with resolute strength that compels one's attention and respect. And of course, Jacob Omohundro himself, who scarcely appears in the novel named for him, is a living symbol of the rapid changes in the country. This is the novel *Gone with the Wind* should have been—or rather, the novel that *Gone with the Wind* failed to be: a more plausible Southern homefront, a clearer picture of the prevailing and central role that African-Americans played in the event, and an authorial lens that views his characters with compassion and humanity, rather than with politics, social imperatives, or sentimental colors.

I do not mean to say that previous Civil War fiction has not examined the individual life. Certainly, many of the classics in the genre have done this. Churchill's *The Crisis*, despite its sentimental tones and colors, offers characters who, if a little too emphatic for the sake of realism, are at least warm and living and make us want to believe in them. This novel is not a battlefield novel by any means. Scott's *The Wave* and Johnston's *The Long Roll*, along with Glasgow's *The Battle Ground*, do this—the latter two being more ideal blends of the battlefield and story and the homefront story. Kantor, Dowdey, and others from mid-century have done this as well. But compared to Inman, Duncan Gatewood, and Marguerite Omohundro, many characters in classic Civil War fiction seem rather conventional and unremarkable.

The reader's imaginative encounter with Civil War history, ideally, is deepened by the rich and detailed cultural landscape that recent novels give us, following the lead of Frasier and McCaig. Ozark folkways enrich the texture of Paulette Jiles' *Enemy Women*, a novel that is much more than a romance by virtue of the genuine living voice of the protagonist's narration and the convincing setting of rural Missouri that becomes almost a character, at once vivid and sensual, yet subtle. The winner of last year's Shaara prize, Marie Jakober's *Only Call Us Faithful*, offers a look at the inside of the Confederate capital, rich with details, in the form of a memoir of a reclusive woman—a ghost of an historical woman, Elizabeth Van Lew, to be precise. Jakober's novel keeps the reader straddling the twilight zone between war time and our own times, as
the ghost's vision takes in the modern world and its lack of moral vision, and connects the two eras. Our cultural icons, such as the painted and artificial goddess of Southern white womanhood—Scarlett O'Hara—appear as if characters, for in this twilight zone, all workings of the human mind exist as residue.

More Civil War novelists now are accomplished historians in many ways that writers a few years ago were not. There are more who are careful and meticulous crafts persons, too, in my observation. The intensity of detail, of authentic flavors of the time, have produced the eloquence of Frasier's finely-crafted prose in *Cold Mountain* (which was seven years in the writing, we are told), the nearly-perfect integration of numerous story threads of McCaig's closely-woven plot in *Jacob's Ladder*, the haunting beauty of Howard Bahr's prose in *The Black Flower*, all indicate better art as well as compelling stories.

So the trends in social history have affected the world of fiction, too. I still think there is much room yet for the sensitively-wrought battlefield novel, but I like to see the fiction we produce now looking much farther behind the lines in meaningful ways. One phenomenon that I see developing further is the biographical realism that began in novels like Shaara's *The Killer Angels* and Safire's *Freedom*—where the main characters are historical figures, and their actions based on research. In some ways, this is where fiction meets alternative history, or speculative history. Safire's book, for instance, has an Underbook in the back, where nearly every incident in the novel is detailed and documented by history—and when there is not history to cover it, he fills in with the writerly imagination, and explain how and why he does so. Max Byrd's recent *Grant* does this, too. As for the possibility that the characters of such novels might confuse the historical record—after all, Shaara, Safire, and others have taken liberties with the historical record in order to make a good story—there is this risk. Or, the well-researched novel of biographical realism could serve to open up the topic: to lead readers to explore further the history. Witness the flurry of research on Gettysburg in the years since *The Killer Angels*.

I find a lot more mysteries being set in Civil War contexts, Owen Parry's Abel Jones novels being the most notable. Ann McMillan's medical murder mysteries set in Richmond are a fascinating use of the period and events. Mysteries that cross time as well as realistic thrillers are more numerous and add texture to both fields. This phenomenon puzzles me somewhat. I suppose that the setting of a civil war is tempting territory, rich with secrets, betrayal, and lawless impulses, for the mystery writer. Even Anne Perry has lately produced a fun
departure from her usual work with

*Slaves of Obsession.*

Owen Parry deserves more than a passing mention here. I find his novels, beginning with *Faded Coat of Blue*, to be so refreshing and unique in the sense of his using a distinctly un-heroic hero, a man of paradoxes, to track down high crimes both on and off the battlefield—a character so at odds with himself that he becomes flesh and blood on the page with a plausibility that is rare. Abel Jones, repentant libertine and prig, repentant killer who is in uniform once again (paradoxically) out of a rather Christian sense of duty, a very flawed dispenser of proverbs and folk wisdom, is at the same time full of hubris and Methodist humility and yet so very aware of his shortcomings. He is unerringly dangerous in combat and swift to compassion in the face of suffering. He is a man of action with a lame leg. Small in stature, unimpressive in appearance and manner, he is perhaps the most convincing because he seems to typify this war for the common man. He is encouraging to readers. We care about him mostly because of his essential and rare, we soberly realize and profound hope in the human race and his refusal to turn to despair and misanthropy while descending into the Dantean nightmare of the human race's darkest side. Parry's solid research and his often poetic prose combine with his (or is it Abel Jones's) sharp and discerning understanding of character. Parry's London is convincing as his picture of the Washington slums, and his portraits of (for instance) McClellan, Beauregard, and Benjamin Disraeli are lifelike enough to disturb your dreams.

I see something in the line of historical fantasy, or maybe it is more like the South American style of magical realism, in Civil War novels that blur the line between reality and the unseen world. Jack Dann's *The Silent* is a haunting example of this, as is Marly Youman's beautifully written *The Wolf Pit*, and Jakober's *Only Call Us Faithful*. Whether the supernatural world is an escape mechanism for the character or truly a manifestation of the other world is uncertain, but we get a different look at the inner life. I am fascinated to see how this trend, if it is a trend, works out.

I confess that alternative history leaves me a little apprehensive, in general, mostly because the fact that history becomes so malleable that it is easy to lose track of our history that have inspired our passion for this very central part of our past. And, frankly, some alternative history stories and novels are just plain fun, and some do not give us a taste for the age they are fantasy.
stories in 19th Century garb. But I have taken a different view of some of the more successful alternative history novels recently. *Meade's Reprise* by John Duke Merriam, although a flawed publication, offers a believable and viable speculation on Gettysburg. Dennis P. McIntire does even better in *Lee at Chattanooga*, a serious and valid exploration of another scenario as well as being a good story: he has the personal details of Lee and Bragg and others so accurately in hand, that we are led to treat the idea seriously. In spite of the cheesy and vague title, and the idea of AK-47s for the CSA, Harry Turtledove's *Guns of the South* is a truly great read, a product of fine research, and a harrowingly clear consideration of the random movements of history and causation. When this genre is done well, as many recent books have been, they give us not only a good read but a serious reflection on the forces of history.

I am the eternal optimist anyway: I see more fiction of better quality, and of a wider range of invention, in recent years than we have ever had before. The ways we have imaginatively engaged the Civil War are ever-broadening. We have not run out of ways to experience the events.

**CWBR: Are there any recent books on the war that you feel have been overlooked by the scholarly community and/or the general public?**

**RA:** Well, I would nominate Turtledove's *Guns of the South* as a book likely to have been overlooked by serious Civil War readers, simply because of the packaging of the product—the pulp-back style of title, and the cheesy picture of Robert E. Lee on the paperback cover holding an AK-47. It is made to look like pulp fiction. But it is a great yarn, just a fun read, and makes you wonder what kind of misapprehensions about the core of truth we might have about a past event simply because Alternative A is what happened, rather than Possibility B.

Two novels I have mentioned above, *Enemy Women* (Paulette Jiles) and *Only Call Us Faithful* (Marie Jakober), deserve more attention, I think. Both are absorbing stories, very finely written in vivid and substantive prose, and neither of them pull any punches on the violence of the war or the desperation of the people whose lives are being tossed about by the winds of war. And some readers might mistakenly take Owen Parry's mysteries lightly.

The alternative history titles I mentioned might be overlooked by the serious history buff, but there is more valid history savvy in these literary speculations than in many historical novels of the conventional variety. There are many books
I am missing, no doubt.

**CWBR:** Can and should Civil War literature address current social, political, and moral issues?

**RA:** Good question. Many Americans wonder about the validity of studying the war at all, in one form or another, since the issues are either resolved or still with us, depending on which camp you are in. Now while I say that I have never been one to preach art-for-art's-sake only, and that perhaps didacticism, for its own sake, is bad in Literature, I would feel uncomfortable saying that Civil War literature should teach certain issues—or even should address them.

First of all, I think it is a mistake to use a historical novel to preach a current issue. Such a book, on a practical level, just will not work. But we must acknowledge that moral issues and the Civil War go hand-in-hand. A historical novel ably fleshing out a moral dilemma of the time, and someone resonating with our current angst, is when art happens in such fiction. Ask any American to name our most moral war, and most will say the Civil War. Our perceptions still argue that people went to war for moral reasons. James McPherson's *For Cause and Comrades* makes this case, citing personal writings of soldiers who indicated that moral cause for the war was a major motivator. I realize that there is probably a Marxist theorist on my left shoulder, arguing that everything is economic. And John Keegan and other historians have ably pointed out that the motivations for going to war had more to do with economics, peer pressure, and the fervor of social passions more than abstract patriotism. Fine and that is all certainly true. But it does not necessarily diminish the commitment for a cause that the soldiers had—Union, slavery, home, liberty (as they saw it). The characters in Civil War novels—the best of them—are faced with having to make their individual choices at crucial junctures. As the slaughter and waste of the war challenge the characters' resolve, they are led to question their pre-conceived values, thus creating the dramatic tension in a good war novel. And if we as readers see our time as having a corresponding loss of faith, in a time of great danger and upheaval, we will surely identify in strong ways with the situation. Robert Penn Warren, poet, novelist, and influential critic, once referred to the imaginative appeal of the war: The inwardness of the story of those characters from the Civil War gives the attraction of drama. In the struggle to define clear aims and certain commitments in the complexity of life, in the struggle to achieve identity and human charity, we find the echo of our own lives, and that fact draws our imagination. We are smuggled into the scene and endure the
action.

We are caught up in the action partly because we hope that we too could endure and offer our last full measure of devotion if need be but also because the confusion and fragility of formerly dependable things may cause us to feel that our time is much like theirs, and our moral choices the same.

I think study of the war, even via the imagination in fiction, is a search for finding moral choices in an amoral world. Perhaps what we need is to find hope and compassion and meaning in an age when we need it most. Perhaps we would like to borrow a little of theirs. This may be the reason why so many Vietnam vets participate in Civil War battle reenacting in order to absorb and appropriate some feeling of fighting for a clearly-defined righteous cause.

We still see this as a heroic age, and to experience it imaginatively, according to Warren, may be, in fact, the very ritual of being American. Inman, in *Cold Mountain*, is engaged in a moral journey, in search of redemption and in rejection of the corruption that surrounds him. Sallie Botkin and Duncan Gatewood both make their own peace by rejecting failed values and striking out on their own. Abel Jones continues, in spite of the moral sewer he is called to clean up, to hope and believe in the essential goodness in human nature. So, I think we cannot avoid moral issues in the best Civil War fiction. We still feel that this was what the War was all about, when it comes to individual choices choices in a world that offers no easy answers. We find hope, in their dire struggles against despair and cynicism.