

REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS:Shiloh: A Novel

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Feature Essay

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Foote, Shelby *REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS:Shiloh: A Novel*. Dial Press, 1951; Reprinted by Vintage Books, 1980,

Shelby Foote at the Cross Roads of Our Being

The Civil War was the crossroads of our being as a nation, wrote Shelby Foote, standing at that crossroads as the author of *The Civil War*, the now classic three volume narrative.

Having finished that monumental history, Shelby Foote the novelist stood at his own crossroads as a writer.

He took on the Civil War as a job of work. Having published Foote's **Shiloh**, one of the shortest novels of the war, Random House asked him to write a short history of the war. Such symmetry must have been appealing to publisher and author, assuming great appeal for readers. But the war is a web, and if you touch it at any point. So six years after **Shiloh**, volume I appeared, almost 20 times longer than Foote's novel. In 1963, volume II appeared at the high water mark of the Civil War Centennial, amid a flood of other, and shorter, histories. Labored upon as long as the first two together, Volume III appeared in 1974, when interest in the war was at low tide. Thus, a 1.2 million-word monument stands at the crossroads of our being as a nation and of his being as a writer. Understandably, during those two decades of hard labor as a nonacademic historian, Foote published no novels.

Shelby Foote's reputation as a southern novelist, admired by Faulkner, was well into its ascendancy before **Shiloh**. His first novel *Tournament* appeared in 1949, and, remarkably, within the next three years, still in his thirties, he published three more novels, *Follow Me, Down, Love in a Dry Season*, and *Shiloh* (on the 90th anniversary of the battle). *Jordan County: A Landscape in Narrative* came out only two years later. This young writer was being watched. These five novels dealt with serious subjects and themes: the vainglorious rise

and inglorious decline of Southern plantation aristocracy, the economic plight of poor whites, and class and race relations in such small towns as the one Foote grew up in, Greenville, Mississippi.

But as it has turned out, to take his place firmly among his fellow novelists, Foote needed to have followed his distinctive Civil War novel quite soon with a novel of major importance. Had he indeed written a short history of the War and soon enough afterwards that major novel, I imagine that his reputation would have been secure. With each volume of the war narrative, he earned the respect and gratitude of many readers and of those historians who are not willfully blind to the high achievements of nonprofessionals. But he did not achieve fame and fortune until another nonprofessional, Ken Burns, made Shelby Foote a welcome guest in millions of homes with his epic documentary film in 1990. The flowing, rhythmic accent, the sonorous voice, the gray-bearded face, the gentlemanly demeanor made him--and finally his massive book, more often bought than read--a venerable national monument at the crossroads of our being.

But as a writer, teacher, and member of the Society for the Study of Southern Literature, I saw over the parade of decades too few references to him as a southern novelist; the first book about him did not appear until 1992. Invitations to speak as a Civil War historian and requests for interviews with the iconic man, who might well have played Robert E. Lee in *Gettysburg*, came so thick and fast, so relentlessly that he lacked the energy, as he grew older, to re-instate himself as a novelist. The publication at last of a new novel, *September, September* in 1978 was greeted not only with appreciation but some relief and hope for more, but in vain, for it proved to be his last. When Shelby Foote died almost three decades later, on June 27, 2005, at the age of 88, the nation mourned his death most profoundly as the death of one of the greatest and most beloved historians of our time.

I wish now to urge a rediscovery of Shelby Foote as a novelist, beginning, in this venue, with *Shiloh*. Foote's artistry makes the two-day battle of Shiloh expressive of the whole war.

The structure is innovative but simple at the outset, but for a 222-page work quite complex as connections, parallels, internal allusions, motifs, thematic insights and implications cumulate. The reader experiences the omniscient author's movement from one first-person oral, sometimes perhaps written, past tense narrations to another. The two narratives of Confederate Lieut. Palmer

Metcalf, Aide-de-Camp, Gen. Johnston's Staff, frame the other narratives. Metcalfe is qualified to provide the reader with general background and overall strategy and tactics. To Metcalfe's opening narrative, Foote juxtaposes the narrative of Union Captain Walter Fountain, Adjutant, 53rd Ohio. He is a dead man talking to us, because he is killed later on. The narratives of two privates follow the two officers: Confederate Private Luther Dade, Rifleman, 6th Mississippi and Union Private Otto Flickner, Cannoneer, 1st Minnesota Battery. (Foote served briefly as Captain of field artillery in WWII.) Next comes Confederate Sergeant Jefferson Polly, Scout, General Forrest's Cavalry; his story is overall the most effective. Variety now seems imperative and Foote provides it, with the brief narratives of the 12 members of a squad of the 23rd Indiana. One consists only of these last words, Tell my wife--. Metcalfe, now unattached, returns to provide a stunning end to the structure, giving the novel a Confederate frame. By labeling these somewhat testimonial narratives, Foote expresses the isolation individual soldiers feel within the mass, despite, ironically, their frequent use of the pronoun we.

Foote opens each narrative effectively: I had lost my horse in the charge at the Fallen Timbers. Now I held onto the tailgate of a wagon filled with wounded. And most of his endings are as effective as the first, when Gen. Johnston, who is soon to die of a neglected wound, speaks the famous line, Tonight we will water our horses in the Tennessee River, recalling Stonewall Jackson's dying words, Let us cross over the river and rest in the shade of the trees. Many pages later, the rebel private ends his narrative with a description of Johnston dead. He still looked handsome, lying there with his eyes glazing over. Foote sometimes opens with a motif that he reverses in the end, as when Private Flickner begins his narrative by telling how he challenged to a fight a comrade who called him a coward and ends it by answering the question, What happened to you? with I was scared.

Foote puts some wonderful expressions into the mouths of his narrators, such as, Some were gut-shot, making high yelping sounds like a turpented dog. The novel is full of powerful lines, such as: He was running down the slope, stone dead already.

War breeds paradoxes and ironies. Describing a mass burial of Confederate dead, a squad member observes that rebels generally rotted faster than our men. They turned blacker, too. The thousands who owned no slaves turned black as slaves as they lay dead. The squad section ends with comment on Union dead

and a response to the question, why are we fighting? Winter and Pettigrew were lying dead out there in the woods and I was not. What right did I have thinking it was up to me to say why.

Sharp imagery contributes to the artistry that sets this novel apart from most Civil War novels. The column was strung out at twisting and squirming like a crippled snake. I saw a reb and a Union man lying on opposite sides of the road, both in the standard prone position for firing. Their rifles were level and they both had one eye shut. They had the same wound, a neat red hole in the forehead. The cruel confusion of war is focused in that charged image.

The novel is rich with insights. Roads led from all corners of the battlefield up to a place on top of the bluff where they came together to form one road giving down to the Landing. Geography is fate. The first narrator in the squad section opens with: I used to think how strange it was that the twelve of us had been brought together by an event which separated brothers and divided the nation. Like the map of the battle that Foote himself drew books about war were written to be read by God Almighty, because no one but God ever saw it that way.

When I opened the door to the United States Civil War Center in the early 1990's, Ken Burns and Shelby Foote and Ted Turner and Jeff Shaara stood with me in spirit, as members of the national board. Movies and novels and Foote's narrative have awakened the consciousness and the consciences of Americans to the Civil War, making traffic at the crossroads a little congested perhaps but much more dynamic.

Serving with Shelby Foote on a panel at Loyola University about a decade ago, I asked him why no novelist had done for Reconstruction what he had done for the war years. In effect, he said that they do not see the dramatic potential and profound significance of it. As if he were standing again at the crossroads of our being, he summarized brilliantly--in a sentence I have quoted at every opportunity--the entire history of our nation. This nation committed two sins for which it can never atone: slavery and reconstruction.

The implications of that declaration so clearly express my own convictions that I do not remember whether or how he elaborated upon it. I think he meant that not the South alone committed the sin of slavery and not the North alone committed the sin of Reconstruction, but that both the North and the South

committed both sins together. While the multiform virtues of the unification of this nation are clear to most Americans, I have argued that we are in dire need of a complex but clear understanding of the fact that many of the dark problems of this nation may be traced from our time back through the decades to the era of Reconstruction, almost three times longer than the war itself.

While no historian or novelist (not I) is likely soon to surpass Foote's Homeric epic, the public icon thrives on his living voice and motion and will eventually fade from view. Let us then rediscover and re-evaluate or discover for the first time and evaluate Shelby Foote the young novelist. Perhaps one of the most fitting ways to honor Shelby Foote in this year of his death is to see more fully, more clearly, that figure standing among us at the crossroads. When we listen in the novels for the voice we remember so well, what do we hear?

For more information about Shelby Foote, see C. Stuart Chapman's *Shelby Foote: A Writer's Life* (University Press of Mississippi, 2003) and Chapman's review of James Panabaker's *Shelby Foote and the Art of History*. Or, go to the United States Civil War Center home page.

Founder of the United States Civil War Center and of the Civil War Book Review, David Madden is the author of Sharpshooter: A Novel of the Civil War (now in paperback) and of nine other novels. Among his nonfiction works are four edited books related to the Civil War: Loss of the Sultana, Thomas Wolfe's Civil War, The Legacy of Robert Penn Warren, and Beyond the Battlefield. He interrupted work on his magnum opus, London Bridge in Plague and Fire, to write a short novel, Abducted by Circumstance, now being considered by Random House. A collection of his literary essays will be published early in 2006, entitled Touching the Web of Southern Writers, along with a book about his work called David Madden: A Writer For All Genres. He is the recipient of the Robert Penn Warren Award for fiction.