

### From Battlefields Rising: How the Civil War Transformed American Literature

Cynthia Wachtell

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## Review

Wachtell, Cynthia

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**Fuller, Randall** *From Battlefields Rising: How the Civil War Transformed American Literature*. Oxford University Press, \$29.95 ISBN 978-0-19-534230-7

### Understanding how War Influences Literature

Randall Fuller's *From Battlefields Rising* focuses upon the northern literary luminaries of the Civil War era. The work, though, is no dry scholarly treatise or exercise in abstruse literary criticism; instead, Fuller delivers an engaging story. He explains in the introduction,

This, then, is a story of America's greatest writers as they struggled to make sense of the Civil War in old and new literary forms and to uphold their highest ideals . . . It is a story about how these writers came to realize . . . that upholding their beliefs had come at an enormously high price . . . It is a story, ultimately, about how the war tested their deepest commitments (9).

Fuller is a gifted storyteller. He evokes the small details – the ice that is slow to melt on Walden Pond as Henry David Thoreau lies dying nearby in the spring of 1862, the boy with pneumonia and the soldier shot through the lungs who struggle for breath on either side of Louisa May Alcott as she sits stunned during her first shift as a volunteer nurse in the Union Hotel Hospital – and he gets the details right.

Fuller demonstrates how the Civil War forced change on American writers. The war that brought a much desired end to slavery also brought death on a scale that was hard to comprehend. As a result, Herman Melville and others had to recognize that the old ways of writing did not suit the new ways of war. Fuller explains, "Modern, mechanical warfare had produced new, uncomfortable truths, and Melville believed that new language, new modes of expression were required to convey those truths" (196). But this is one of the most direct statements in the book about the ways the war transformed American literature.

Generally, Fuller prefers to show rather than to tell.

Among the pantheon of writers that Fuller shows to greatest effect is Ralph Waldo Emerson. The intellectual legacy of the great transcendentalist was the focus of Fuller's first book, *Emerson's Ghost: Literature, Politics, and the Making of Americanists*, and in many ways *From Battlefield Rising* is also an Emerson-centric work. The book both begins and ends with a focus on Emerson, and throughout the intervening chapters the renowned essayist repeatedly appears. In one of the most haunting sections of the book, Fuller focuses upon Emerson's refusal to allow his son, Edward, to enlist in the Union forces. Having many years earlier lost his first son to scarlet fever, Emerson cannot bare to have Edward in harm's way.

Just as Emerson serves as the psychic center of the book, Concord, Massachusetts – where Emerson lived – serves as the book's geographic center, rivaled only by the actual battlefields – Shiloh, Antietam, Fredericksburg, Gettysburg, Petersburg – of the Civil War. In Concord, daughters of the abolitionist martyr John Brown attend school with Nathaniel Hawthorne's son and lodge with Emerson's family. To Concord, Louisa May Alcott returns, half-dead, to her father's home after contracting typhoid pneumonia during her six weeks of volunteer nursing work in an army hospital. A frustrated writer before the war – she had been told by the editor of the *Atlantic*, "You can't write" – Alcott would gain fame for *Hospital Sketches* and later for *Little Women* and *Little Men* (140). But she would never regain her health.

In addition to "Concord's literary lions," Fuller presents writers from throughout the Northeast: Boston Brahmins (James Russell Lowell, Oliver Wendell Holmes), sons of New York's Staten Island elite (Theodore Winthrop, Robert Gould Shaw), the Philadelphia surgeon Silas Weir Mitchell, and such iconoclastic figures as Brooklyn's Walt Whitman and Amherst's Emily Dickinson (166). Southern writers, however, are only minimally represented. Rebecca Harding Davis puts in a brief appearance, in Hawthorne's parlor, where she is shocked by Emerson's and Bronson Alcott's ignorance about "the actual war" (166). Frederick Douglass, the most famous African American of the war years, luckily, receives a lengthier look.

Though not overly long, *From Battlefields Rising* is capacious enough to include some pleasant digressions, such as a passage about the horticulture of the Sea Islands located off the South Carolina and Georgia coast. Thomas

Wentworth Higginson, while training the Union's first black regiment there, marvels at the abundance of "roses & magnolias" (109). So, too, Fuller includes some events that are not strictly about the war, such as the horrific death of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's wife during the summer of 1861. (Her dress caught fire, and the famous poet was unable to save her.) But principally his book is about the Civil War and how a certain set of abolitionist writers, most of whom resided in New England, reacted to it.

Numerous black and white images of authors, forts, and battlefields help illustrate the text. However, not all of the old photographs, lithographs, and prints reproduce well. The combatants in Thur de Thulstrup's chromolithograph of the *Battle of Shiloh* (1888), for example, are hard to see in the absence of color. Taken together, though, the images add an additional dimension to the book and add to its visual appeal.

That the Civil War forced change on American writers will hardly come as a surprise to readers. Fuller does not uncover evidence that has not been previously published, and much of the ground he charts will be familiar to those who are well-read in Civil War literature and history. Daniel Aaron in *The Unwritten War* and George M. Fredrickson in *The Inner Civil War* staked out this territory long ago.

Fuller does, though, tell a good story. *From Battlefields Rising* is well-researched, well-written, and well worth the read.

*Cynthia Wachtell is the author of War No More: The Antiwar Impulse in American Literature, 1861-1914 and a research associate professor of American studies and director of the S. Daniel Abraham Honors Program at Yeshiva University.*