

Rediscovering Civil War Classics

David Madden

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Madden, David (2006) "Rediscovering Civil War Classics," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 8 : Iss. 3 .
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol8/iss3/4>

Feature Essay

Fall 2006

Madden, David *REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS.*

Trail-Makers of the Middle Border

Hamlin Garland

The MacMillan Company

ISBN 1417906480

\$79.00

426 pp. hardcover

An East Tennessean, I came to my earliest study of the Civil War poorly armed with a picture of Yankees and Rebels from the states east of the Mississippi warring against each other. And even now, I am often surprised all over again to be reminded of the fact that thousands of Americans marched away from their fields in such faraway northern trans-Mississippi states as Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa, and from the Dakota Territory, and fell in fields way down South in Dixie.

At least in the abstract, few wars are as well remembered as the American Civil War, especially in the South; and even Northerners tend to picture that War as a Southern experience.

The Southern Mountain folks and the Plantation Lowlanders have always been an exotic people in the eyes of industrial Northeasterners and agrarian Midwesterners, just as in the eyes of most Americans the four years of Civil War battles, especially in the South, are a romantic though brutal era. Enlistment offered a delightful excursion into a strange and beautiful country, a land of flowers and romance. The long list of the dead after Shiloh so affected civilians and soldiers that, as Hamlin Garland observed in his seminal work

Trail-Makers of the Middle Border, [a]ll levity remaining in the minds of those who had hitherto regarded the war as a romantic excursion vanished utterly.

Compared with the battle years, the long twilight of the antebellum era and the prolonged darkness of the Reconstruction era—almost three times longer than the war years—are faint echoes in the consciousnesses of most Americans. But Civil War battles were suddenly pitched and suddenly over, and in the end, the battles ceased. To dwell upon battles and related activities is attractive and easy. To get into focus the eras before and after and to listen imaginatively and compassionately to the muted voices of Americans, especially northern Midwesterners, during those eras is very difficult.

I am convinced that we understand ourselves as Americans more profoundly when we take on the task of focusing upon the kind of life Americans led before and after the War than when we repeatedly wander the battlefields in books and on foot.

Hamlin Garland's lifelong mission was to give Americans a full picture of the life of ordinary men and women of the northern Midwest, before, during, and after the war. He achieved that mission so well in his autobiography, *A Son of the Middle Border* (1917), that he became the famous national literary figure he always dreamed of being; the sequel, *A Daughter of the Middle Border*, won the Pulitzer Prize for 1922.

He wrote no book primarily about the Civil War battle-era but wove it into the tapestry of frontier life that he began to weave with his first successful book, *Main-Traveled Roads: Six Mississippi Valley Stories* (1891), the most powerful of which is, *The Return of a Private*. A major scene in Garland's autobiography, *A Son of the Middle-Border*, is the same homecoming of a private. I had heard about Hamlin Garland much of my life but had not read his work until stumbling onto **Trail-Makers of the Middle Border** in a Louisiana antique store near Port Hudson. My hunch that it would deal somehow with the Civil War proved true when I looked at Part II, *In War*, 180 pages of a 426 page book, Part I of which is called *In Peace*. This book, too, ends with the homecoming scene.

In *The Return of a Private*, soldiers returned with a dumb expectancy. The returning father of this autobiographical story saw himself sick, worn out, taking up the work on his half-cleared farm, the inevitable mortgage standing ready

with open jaw to swallow half his earnings. He had given three years of his life for a mere pittance of pay, and now---. Peace-time life ain't exactly like dying, he says, as Garland interjects, An observer might have said, He is looking down upon his own grave.' Going home, [h]e crawled along like some minute wingless variety of fly, haunted by images of battlefield slaughter: The boy lay with his face in the dirt in the ploughed field they were marching across. The welcome home is awkward, but his son (Garland) will never forget that figure, that face. It will always remain as something epic, that return of the private.

The private indulges in the privacy of his own bedroom. They were lovers again Then they rose They began to plan fields and crops for next year. Here was the epic figure who Walt Whitman has in mind, whom he calls the common American soldier With livery of war on his limbs, this man was facing his future, his thoughts holding no scent of battle. Clean, clear-headed . . . he turned future-ward with a sublime courage. Even so, he entered upon a still more hazardous future The common soldier of the American volunteer army had returned. His war with the South was over, and his fight, his daily running fight with nature and against the injustice of his fellow men, was begun again. But in Garland's eyes, [h]e rises into a magnificent type. Garland might well have included Southern agrarian veterans when he concludes, [t]hey are fighting a hopeless battle, and must fight till God gives them furlough. Garland's style is riddled with war words, expressing his swing in attitude back and forth from epic optimism about the future to foreboding. While his victorious Union was punishing the South with almost two decades of Reconstruction, the private was still fighting to survive on the frontier. For a vivid image of the veteran farmer, see Winslow Homer's painting *The Veteran in a New Field*; the veteran seems to mimic the sickle of war, of death. Or perhaps defy it once again.

When we compare *The Return of a Private* with the opening of *A Son of the Middle-Border*, we see that the mature writer of fiction refers to himself only as the child; then the child as an adult tells the true story of the father but from the perspective of the child. In **Trail-Makers of the Middle Border**, the successful writer tells the fictional story of his father's wartime struggles in peace and in battle simultaneously with the story of his friend Ulysses S. Grant. (Almost three decades earlier, Garland published *Life of Ulysses S. Grant* (1898)). The father had left Boston for a new life on the frontier but saw only a pitiful ending of high hopes and of seven years of unremitting and savage toil. He did not go to war for Wisconsin. He was going to aid in the preservation of a national ideal Lincoln was his leader and Grant his warrior. Both were Western in spirit. He

and his neighbors saw a man a little above middle height and of powerful build, the soldier's attitude expressed a quiet dignity, and they had faith that Captain Grant will put the shouting into something concrete. When Vicksburg surrendered after Grant's ruthless siege, the General did not boast. Plain as a farmer in dress and manner, no knight of Arthur's court was more essentially the courteous foe This entire campaign had the audacity of the trail In the three works (fiction and autobiography) that I cited previously, Garland's father is extolled as an ordinary man and so is Grant, with the difference that the father is thrust into extraordinary events led by an apparently ordinary man who evolves into an extraordinary leader. In **Trail-Makers of the Middle Border**, Garland artfully develops the character of the private and his general in alternate passages.

Hamlin Garland was born in a log cabin near West Salem, Wisconsin. His father migrated there from Maine. He moved the family to Iowa when Hamlin was nine, and they toiled twelve years on a Middle Border farm. In 1881, the father moved further north and westward to Ordway, South Dakota. Hamlin had a violent affection for his mother and resented the hard life his father imposed upon her.

Garland's autobiographical writings told the story several times over of his own movement from frontier childhood to youthful rebellion. Relentlessly pushing westward like his father, he was, ironically, pulled backward to the east. Eventually, the reluctant young frontiersman sought another life in Boston. The lingering painful irony of Hamlin's life and his literature was that his pioneer father left his mother to go to a war that pitted brother against brother, and Hamlin left his mother on the frontier to go to the literary wars of the Northeast, where he wrote about both abandonments. Hamlin dramatizes the bitter fact that men fighting battles always implies women fighting battles of their own. He never got over feeling guilty for leaving or neglecting his mother. Escaping season-driven poverty and monotony on a Wisconsin frontier farm, he embraced captivity in the Boston library, educating himself and aspiring through excruciating poverty to cultivate an intellectual development rivaling what Harvard offered. Whitman changed the world for me, the world being America. The spiritual significance of America was let loose on me. And Henry George enabled him to see the cause of poverty and suffering in the world. I like to imagine Garland quoting Grant to express his intentions toward the Boston literary elite: I propose to move immediately upon your works.

Garland's informal lectures somehow caught the attention of William Dean Howells, editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, who became his longtime mentor. Hamlin's first published work was a play, *Under the Wheel: A Modern Play in Six Scenes* (1890). *A Spoil of Office* (1892) was his first novel. *Rose of Dutcher's Cooly* (1895) was proscribed in many libraries for its treatment of sex. *The Captain of the Gray Horse Troop* (1902) was a conventional romance set in the West.

Garland had good reason to call himself a literary nomad. From Boston, he moved westward again to Chicago, where he conformed, married, prospered and became domesticated. New York lured him eastward again; then in 1930, Los Angeles lured him the final western frontier for the last decade of his life.

Garland was thirty-one years old when his first important book, *Main-Traveled Roads, Six Mississippi Valley Stories* (1891) appeared; when he died in 1940 in Hollywood, he had published many works of fiction and nonfiction and was a beloved national icon.

In his lucid introduction to the 1963 Civil War Centennial Holt edition of *Main-Traveled Roads*, Thomas A. Bledsoe offers some key phrases, his own and that of others, so vivid I will quote and paraphrase them as I string out my own commentary.

What put Garland on the map as a literary critic was *Crumbling Idols: Twelve Essays on Art, Dealing Chiefly with Literature, Painting and the Drama* (1894). An offended reviewer opined that the book should have had for a cover design a dynamite bomb. He had a fearsome positiveness, an absolute certainty of belief in all his views, no matter how recently won, no matter how soon to be lost. He was a realistic critic of the rigors of prairie existence. But he was no naturalist, no determinist. He never wrote without a sense of individual responsibility. Indignant, but nostalgic, he was always optimistic, as contrasted to the pessimism of naturalist Stephen Crane.

Jason Edwards: An Average Man (1891), a short novel, is about the failure of the average man to achieve the American Dream in a nation that had plunged itself into nightmare when Garland was an infant. His dedication expresses his vision: To the Farmers' Alliance, Whose high mission is to unite the farmer and the artisan, the north and the south, the blue and the gray under one banner, marching in a continent-wide battle-line against the denial of equal rights, I

dedicate this story, with its implied hatred of all special privileges. That vision still motivated him when he wrote *The Book of the American Indian* (1923), expressing his indignation over the plight of the American Indian Very nearly equal to his best, especially the story *Outlaw*.

In *A Son of the Middle-Border*, Garland stated his credo: Obscurely forming in my mind were two great literary concepts—that truth was a higher quality than beauty, and that to spread the reign of justice should everywhere be the design of the artist. Bledsoe says Garland wrote in a mood of bitter resentment, with full intention of telling the truth about western farm life. He quotes Garland's assertion that he tried to keep a certain balance between Significance and Beauty and to let the artist check the preacher. Henry James saw the beauty of art in his work. *The Private's Return*, says Bledsoe, remains an artistically effective story.

Bledsoe stresses the contrast between the bitter realism of *Main-Traveled Roads* and the complacent romanticizing of *They of the High Trails* (1916), its later counterpart, the polemical rebellion of a radical intellectual regional writer and the sentimentality and quaintness of a mere local colorist. From start to finish, however, he was a moralist in various modes. The man and the reputation comprised those and other paradoxes.

Garland emerged from his self-education regimen in the Boston Public Library a lonely figure with the highest aspirations and within a decade had become a public figure, notorious realist and radical. Within another decade, he had moved from the rhetoric of outrage to pathetic clichés, from moral indignation to banal bromides, somewhat as the wartime action of a soldier may surrender to the peacetime bombast of a veteran. In his old age he inveighed against the preponderance of degrading literature in America. No fireside is safe from the reek of the roadhouse.

Beloved as a typically American writer in his prime, Garland was not well-regarded by H. L. Mencken, who called him a stranger on Parnassus. Wallace Stegner declared that among Iowa's cultural regionalists, Garland is of the first importance. Carl Van Doren saw Garland as having been misled by the false light of local color, but regarded *A Son of the Middle Border* as his best. Bledsoe contradicts Van Doren with his own choice: **Main-Traveled Roads**, one of the genuinely significant American autobiographies, and an essential book for anyone who wishes to understand the time. Bledsoe concludes that Garland's was not a major talent, but that he wrote two minor masterpieces.

Having tried to suggest here that parts of Hamlin Garland's work deserve a declared place in Civil War literature, I fervently hope that a university press will reprint **Trail-Makers of the Middle Border's** Part II, In War, along with passages from his Grant biography, the short story The Return of a Private, and other passages from among his works.

Founding Director of the Civil War Center and creator of Civil War Book Review, David Madden is author or editor of six books on the Civil War, the most recent of which is Touching the Web of Southern Novelists (University of Tennessee Press, ISBN 1572334630, \$37.00, hardcover). He has just finished his tenth novel, set on ancient London Bridge in the 12th and 17th centuries. A collection of original essays by novelists, poets, and scholars has just been published, entitled David Madden: A Writer for All Genres (University of Tennessee Press, ISBN 1572334606, \$34.05, hardcover).