

The Tangled Web of the Civil War and Reconstruction: Readings and Writings From a Novelist's Perspective

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Review

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Madden, David *The Tangled Web of the Civil War and Reconstruction: Readings and Writings from a Novelist's Perspective*. Rowman and Littlefield, \$27.95 ISBN 9781442243484

Multiplying Perspectives from which to Understand the Civil War

David Madden has enjoyed a long career as a prolific and well-regarded novelist, including nearly a half century as writer in residence at Louisiana State University. As the founding director of the United States Civil War Center at LSU, he has also written extensively on the history, politics, and historical and political representations of the war, the search for its causes, and the repercussions of its aftermath. His work on the Civil War and Reconstruction also includes a novel, *Sharpshooter*—set in his own bitterly divided native region of East Tennessee—itsself in large measure about issues of history, memory, narration, and representation.

All of these interests now merge in a volume of collected writings, all previously published or given as presentations, entitled *The Tangled Web of the Civil War and Reconstruction: Readings and Writings from a Novelist's Perspective*. The main premise of the text, from start to finish, is that Americans continue to “miss the war”—its causes, its myriad forms of experience, its consequences—by failing to see it from as many perspectives as possible: north and south, white and black, male and female, combatant and civilian, *ad infinitum*. Until recently, he queries, where were “books on Confederate exiles in South America, on medicine or surgery, on the economics of individual Southern states, on the role of Native Americans and black regiments, and on the role of the Irish, Jews, and other European immigrants, North and South” (7)? For this he faults the heavy hand of the battles and leaders school of history—a complaint lodged similarly against *Century Magazine* many decades ago by Stephen Crane in *The Red Badge of Courage* (first subtitled “Private Fleming, His Various Battles,” and then “An Incident of the American Civil War”) and

more sardonically by Mark Twain in his autobiographical "The Private History of a Campaign that Failed." In the twenty-first century, Madden now goes further to plead, if we are to understand the immense national legacies of the Civil War and Reconstruction, for a multidisciplinary approach in which there is no question about the war that is not worth asking.

Structurally, the book is divided into three sections. The first consists of essays on historical and literary representations of the war, some familiar and others less known. Subjects of the former include James MacPherson's *For Cause and Comrades*, William Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!* and the Civil War novels of Michael and Jeff Shaara. Subjects perhaps unknown to the general reader include Fletcher Pratt's *A Short History of the Civil War*; Joseph Stanley Pennells *Of Rome Hanks and Kindred Matters*; and Madison Jones's *Nashville, 1864: The Dying of the Light*. Also included in the section are speculations on Classics of Civil War Fiction, rather sketchy outlines of putative Civil War texts by O. Henry, and two historical accounts of little known Civil War incidents, one a Unionist plot to destroy strategic railroad bridges in East Tennessee, and the other the sinking of the Mississippi steamship *Sultana* in 1865, killing thousands of repatriated Union POWs on their journey home. The essays are occasionally uneven, overdeveloped at times and underelaborated at others. Madden claims *Absalom! Absalom!* to be the great Southern Novel of the Civil War because of Quentin Compson's anguished attempts to come to terms with the burden of Southern History—both his own, and all those others refracted in his narrative through the lives and experiences of every major character in the book. There is also a somewhat random itemizing of "popular culture forces" alleged to have drawn public attention to the war. These include events, texts, and institutions, listed but not really explained in their associations.

As to approach, in a text devised for general readers, Madden does not pretend to the style of the academic historian or the academic critic. Rather, as a reader of historical and literary texts, he is of the appreciation school. Of the popular Civil War writers Michael and Jeff Shaara, he writes, "Artistically, the son is, I argue, the better novelist" (xiv); or *The Red Badge of Courage* is "a novel I feel is overrated." His method is not that of essayistic argument and illustration. The individual chapters might best be considered reflections, meditations, musings. Sometimes ramblings or meanderings would not be too strong. On the other hand, Madden has earned it. The reader will follow his frequently wise and interesting observations to the end of every section.

For readers interested in Madden's own Civil War fiction, Section Two will be of great interest and, I suspect, fascination. Entitled "Meditations on the Civil War and Reconstruction by Willis Carr, Sharpshooter," it consists of multiple short stories and experimental excerpts from Madden's novel published as free-standing contributions in various literary venues, and then eventually amalgamated into the book. Taken together they form an imaginatively variegated collocation of fragments, in themselves a kind of freestanding postmodern collage.

Imaginatively innovative and stirring as well is the single selection included in Section III, an authorial rewriting of Lincoln's Gettysburg address delivered by Madden at a commemorative event in Gettysburg marking the 133rd anniversary of Lincoln's speech. Here Madden, in a kind of critical performance, as he calls it, astutely and movingly inhabits the phrasings of Lincoln to remind us of what the great Civil War President might still tell us about the national imperatives of historical remembrance and perspective.

To finish the nation's work in searching out the meanings of the Civil War and Reconstruction, Madden exhorts us: to consider no fragment too small or no angle too oblique in getting us toward "the whole, the vision of the whole" (228). For my own part, I am going to go right out and get my own reading copies of Fletcher Pratt, Joseph Stanley Pennell, Evelyn Scott, and other figures hitherto unknown to me. I am going to start *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* this time and finish it. On the basis of Madden's Faulkner essay, I am going to eschew my favorite perennial re-read—*As I Lay Dying*—and go back after a couple of decades and carefully re-read *Absalom! Absalom!* But for the moment, I will be content to pause and thank David Madden for his lifelong commitment to encouraging an honest, tolerant, genuinely collective attempt, for the sake of our own times, to keep going back in history and memory to our own version of horrific fratricidal conflict, invoked by Madden in an epigraph from Lucan's *Civil War*: "of legality conferred on crime we sing, and of a mighty people attacking its own guts with victorious swordhand, of kin facing kin, and . . . of conflict waged with all the forces of the shaken world for universal guilt."

Philip Beidler is Margaret and William Going Professor of English at the University of Alabama, where he has taught American literature since receiving his Ph.D. from the University of Virginia in 1974. His new book, forthcoming from the University of Alabama Press, is entitled Beautiful War: Studies in a Dreadful Fascination.

