

REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS: Civil War Books Not Yet Written

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Feature Essay

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Madden, David *REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS: Civil War Books Not Yet Written.*

Civil War Books Not Yet Written

Before we imagine books not yet written, I wish to say a few words about two novels that almost got written.

Reading the early novels of Frank Norris, a major American novelist of the early twentieth century about whom Americans have a major case of amnesia, I came across a poignant biographical note saying that when he died at the age of 39, having written the famous *Octopus* (1901), an ambitious creative intention died with him—to write a trilogy about the battle of Gettysburg. That reminded me of Upton Sinclair's plan, except that he did finish the first novel in a trilogy, the recently rediscovered *Manassas* (1904) before moving on to complete *The Jungle* (1906). Four decades later, Thomas Wolfe died at the age of 39, leaving behind only notes and coherent fragments of a massive Civil War novel—*The Hills Beyond* (1941). For more information on these works, see my *Rediscovering Civil War Classics* columns in the Spring 2000 and Summer 2002 issues of CWBR, respectively.

A very recent discovery for me is the prominent place of the Civil War in F. Scott Fitzgerald's life and work. The Civil War was the drama of his youth, wrote one of his early biographers, Andrew Turnbull, and indeed of his entire life. He was keenly aware that the war negatively affected his father's life from the time when he was a participant and witness as a boy who took the Confederate side. Among Fitzgerald's juvenilia were the tale of a Confederate soldier and a story about John Wilkes Booth, two of his first four stories. Just before going to Princeton, he wrote and directed a play about a coward who redeems himself through bravery, a theme that runs through the early stories. A decade later, he roamed battlefields in Virginia. In 1940, he tried to persuade MGM to let him write a script based on two of his stories, written in the 1930's:

The End of Hate, based on his father's recollections, and The Night Before Chancellorsville, about Hooker's whores. Richard D. Lehan sees his interest in Grant affecting his conception of *Tender Is the Night* (1934). Fitzgerald believed, says Lehan, that the turning point in America came after the Civil War. So I invite you to imagine the visionary author of *The Great Gatsby* writing the Civil War novel Walt Whitman thought would never get.

All that gives some cause to wonder what other Civil War fiction faded out with the deaths of novelists.

As we enter the fourth year before the beginning of the four-year Sesquicentennial of the Civil War (2011-2015), let us not cry over un-spilled milk. Rather let us imagine nonfiction books that may yet see the light of day, as during the Centennial many of the finest Civil War books—nonfiction and fiction—appeared, many of which retain their power.

A decade ago, in *Phi Kappa Phi Journal*, I posed questions that I hoped writers in every discipline and profession would take up in the 21st century—the sooner the better. Here they are, staring us in the face.

What were the psychological effects of war and Reconstruction upon children?

What forces in the war were set loose in the realm of commerce and business administration?

Does some Civil War painting and photography transcend documentary value to become art?

How did weather determine the day-by-day conduct of the war?

How did the war affect the development of American journalism?

What was the effect of the war upon the development of the organized labor movement?

In what ways have Civil War folklore and popular culture acted as a force in northern and southern society, then and now?

What was the war's impact upon the development of public and private education?

How did sports affect the mental and physical health of troops during the war?

How did the war affect the development of railroads in later decades?

How might linguists show relationships between words and actions?

How might the zoologist's perspective modify our knowledge of the role of animals in the war?

In what ways were rivers important in the war?

How is the influence of religious rhetoric and political oratory seen in the diaries and letters of soldiers and civilians, North and South?

Given the impact of statistics at the end of the war on our sense of its scope, how might today's much more complex and sophisticated statistical tools modify our view of the war?

Over the past 150 years, how have books written for children shaped our attitudes about the war's cause and its legacy?

How did music soothe the savage breast of war or ignite the fire within?

Was the nature and practice of southern agronomy the undoing of the Confederacy?

Which special circumstances spurred developments in technology?

What were some significant and decisive applications of mathematics in the war?

How is the Civil War still relevant to military science?

What transient ecosystems did the war create?

How have fiction, poetry, theater, and film shaped our vision of the war?

What was the role of engineers in the war?

What might geographers contribute to our understanding of the war?

What might ophthalmologists contribute to our understanding of the war?

How did the war stimulate developments in the science of chemistry?

What was the effect of poor nutrition upon military performance?

How did the common study of classical languages affect the thinking of generals on both sides?

How may the American Civil War provide a model for constructing a philosophy and psychology of the phenomenon of civil wars worldwide throughout history?

Since 1990 or so, I have sought out opportunities to encourage the writing of such books, with limited success. Most of these questions remain unanswered. But then, if what we seek is not so much a Sesquicentennial celebration or commemoration of the Civil War but a meditation upon it, we have eight years to come up with answers in books to adorn the endless Civil War bookshelf.

And may those books all become classics never in need of rediscovery.

Founding director of the United States Civil War Center and creator of the Civil War Book Review, David Madden has written several books on the Civil War, including a novel, Sharpshooter. His latest book is Touching the Web of Southern Writers, in which, writing about Faulkner and Robert Penn Warren, among others, he makes the outrageous claim that all fiction written by southerners is to some vital extent about the Civil War and Reconstruction. He is finishing the third novel in a trilogy, London Bridge Is Falling Down. In the planning stage is a book about Civil War worldwide throughout history. David Madden: A Writer for All Genres (The University of Tennessee Press, 2006), a book of essays by scholars and novelists about his writings, appeared on his seventy-third birthday.