

War No More: The Antiwar Impulse in American Literature, 1861-1914

Richard Dilworth Rust

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

Recommended Citation

Rust, Richard Dilworth (2010) "War No More: The Antiwar Impulse in American Literature, 1861-1914," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 4 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol12/iss4/15>

Review

Rust, Richard Dilworth

Fall 2010

Wachtell, Cynthia *War No More: The Antiwar Impulse in American Literature, 1861-1914*. Louisiana State University Press, \$35.00 ISBN 978-0-8071-3562-4

A Literary Look at Antiwar Sentiment

Cynthia Wachtell takes her title, *War No More: The Antiwar Impulse in American Literature, 1861-1914*, from a poem to his wife by an Iowa volunteer, Obadiah Baker. Writing in 1862, Baker ended his poem by wondering, "O God! When will this strife be o'er? / When will we learn to war no more?" (13) Wachtell confirms her own pacifist sympathies by wondering in her conclusion, "Will America ever cease to engage in war" (187)?

In her wide-ranging and thoroughly documented study, Wachtell traces the antiwar impulse in American literature as found in writers such as Ambrose Bierce, Herman Melville, John William De Forest, Walt Whitman, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, Joseph Kirkland, Frank Stockton, William and Henry James, and William Dean Howells. Wachtell positions their writings against sentimental and romanticized views of the Civil War and later wars found especially in popular poetry such as James Ryder Randall's "My Maryland" and Father Abram Ryan's "The Conquered Banner." As an instance, Wachtell contrasts Mollie E. Moore's "highly idealized" poem about the battle of Chickamauga with the stark realism and grotesquery found in Ambrose Bierce's story, "Chickamauga."

Citing 225 works in *War No More*, Wachtell provides a clearly written and comprehensive study of the writers within her purview. Besides examining well-known works about the Civil War such as Whitman's *Drum-Taps*, De Forest's *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty*, and Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, Wachtell provides context by examining contemporary reviews and articles. Her research in two collections of Whitman's papers at the Library of Congress provided information about the "graphic realism" Whitman

described “within the assured privacy of his journal” (91). “After a severe battle,” Whitman noted, “the dead lie mostly on their backs—they swell & bloat—they turn very black & discolored” (90). Similarly, John William De Forest was reticent about telling the public all he knew about “the extreme horror of battle, and the anguish with which the bravest soldiers struggle through it” (78). The reticence of these writers to tell all they knew may not, though, have come from their not daring to do so (as Wachtell argues regarding Melville and De Forest), but rather from a desire Wachtell attributes to Whitman—to “spare the war-weary nation unnecessary pain” (98). There were things about the Civil War, Wachtell quotes Whitman as saying, that would “never be written—perhaps must not and should not be” (87).

Wachtell details how “northerners and southerners alike were smitten” during the Civil War period by Sir Walter Scott’s historical romances (33). Mark Twain did say in *Life on the Mississippi* that “Sir Walter had so large a hand in making Southern character, as it existed before the war, that he is in great measure responsible for the war” (*Life on the Mississippi* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1883), 469). Not all southerners fit into this mould, though. While Wachtell does not treat him, Sidney Lanier in *Tiger-Lilies* deplored the “blood-red flower of war . . . whose roots are in hell” and argued that “if war was ever right, then Christ was always wrong” (*Tiger-Lilies* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1867), 115, 118). A veteran of war service himself, Lanier was clearly antiwar in his sentiments.

In regard, though, to Melville, Hawthorne, De Forest, and Whitman, to whom Wachtell gives much attention, the term “antiwar” oversimplifies matters. Wachtell acknowledges Melville’s “inner turbulence” and ambivalence in his feelings about the Civil War; indeed, Melville had, as in the title of one of his poems in *Battle-Pieces*, a “conflict of convictions” (50). Whitman “vacillated between supporting and questioning the war” (80). Although Wachtell praises him for courageously recounting the veracities of warfare, De Forest “took lasting pride in the role he had played in defeating the Confederacy” (61-62). “Through various of his wartime works,” Wachtell says, Nathaniel Hawthorne “registered his ambivalence about the Civil War” (124).

“Everything in war literature,” Wachtell says, “depends on an individual’s point of view” (5). Something of the same could be said concerning those who write about war literature. Wachtell’s pacifist point of view sometimes leads her to black and white generalizations rather than blue and gray nuances. For

instance, she says, "Striving to give coherent meaning to the war and war deaths, writers avoided ambiguity, pessimism, and doubt" (70). In a sweeping manner, Wachtell asserts that during the Civil War years "most writers, editors, publishers, and readers" had a "shared understanding" that "anything other than uplifting, patriotic, sentimental, and reverential works was not in good taste" (22). "All of the celebrated poets of the era," she says, were "unified in an effort . . . to preserve a semblance of war's order and dignity" (24). They were writing about "a noble endeavor that was favored by God," and "less rosy and idealized interpretations of the war" were "unwelcome" (30).

In sum, while Walt Whitman affirmed in *Specimen Days* that "the real war will never get in the books," Cynthia Wachtell in *War No More* creditably shows strong impulses of some writers, at least, to get close to the real Civil War, and she admirably details "the antiwar impulse" in writings about subsequent wars (87).

Richard Dilworth Rust is Emeritus Professor of English, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He edited Glory and Pathos: Responses of Nineteenth-Century American Authors to the Civil War (1970).