

# Civil War Book Review

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## Canaan

Jack Trammell

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## Review

Trammell, Jack

Fall 2007

**McCaig, Donald** *Canaan*. W.W. Norton and Company, \$24.95 hardcover ISBN 9780393062465

### Reconstructing a Nation in Historical Fiction

Donald McCaig's *Canaan* is a panoramic snapshot of Reconstruction era America that captures the turmoil and human drama of a rapidly changing nation. Moving seamlessly between a multitude of characters and diverse settings, the novel follows several connected plotlines as men and women struggle with issues of race, shifting demographics, personal loss, and economic hardship. In the spirit of great southern writers like William Faulkner and Robert Penn Warren, McCaig sifts through the aftermath of the Civil War and raises up from the ashes real people with real lives and real problems that readers can easily relate to.

McCaig relies on one of the historical novelist's primary prerogatives, blurring the line between obvious facts and more subtle fictions. For example, he employs many historical documents and letters in the text but admittedly alters signatures and context, weaving them in and around mostly fictional characters. Just as unabashedly, a number of real and legendary historical figures also take turns crossing the fictional stage. Ex-Confederate General William Mahone is unscrupulous in promoting his railroad interests, and for those who know of his historical military exploits, McCaig's fictionalized portrayal will strike familiar biographical chords. Likewise with the flamboyant Union General George Armstrong Custer, McCaig brings to life one of the post-Civil War era's most compelling and tragic figures, winding us through the final hours of Custer's infamous date with destiny at the Little Big Horn.

Custer's Last Stand, both in historical terms and in relationship to the novel *Canaan*, stands virtually alone as the defining moment in the cultural clash between Native Americans and westward expanding settlers and U. S. soldiers. From the earliest pages of the novel to its final dramatic chapters, Custer's

partially fictionalized ride into history is strewn with the details and difficulties of that cultural clash, and the novel captures effectively and poignantly the unsettled and sometimes overly optimistic flavor of the times. An American spirit seems to carry characters forward, sometimes against their own will. This thread not only leads Custer to the Little Big Horn, but also carries the entire novel and intentionally or unintentionally holds all other subplots captive to its influence.

McCaig's prose varies in lively fashion, sometimes characterized by Spartan sentences that punch and punctuate, and other times spreading out on the page into more poetic and elaborate descriptions. The narrative is never dull or unimaginative, and the author has a penchant for inserting the occasional unusual word that gives the reader an opportunity to think anew. Even the recipes that begin selected chapters flavor the prose like seasonings going into a narrative stew pot. From the little details of flora and fauna to the immense anxieties and struggles each character grapples with in overcoming the end of the war and a cultural era, McCaig's firm grasp of the bigness of life mirrors metaphorically the possibilities that the western territories held for restless Americans in the 1870s.

The author's particular narrative gift, exhibited also in his previous award-winning novel *Jacob's Ladder*, is the picture that he is able to paint of daily life in post-Civil War Virginia. Arguably impacted as hard as or harder than any southern state by the war, Virginia was in a physical, political, economic, and social shambles after the conflict. Through the trials and tribulations of the fictional Gatewood family, McCaig shows both the indomitable human spirit necessary to start over under such trying circumstances, and the social changes that grew out of the death of a discarded era.

*Canaan* is not, however, about the Civil War. The book is instead about what the Civil War did to America, and how westward expansion quickly provided a needed distraction and outlet for impatient American energy. McCaig makes it clear that the old America had passed away irrevocably and would never be the same after the fratricidal experience, though through the actions of his characters he also makes it clear that America will not only recover, but will be more powerful and vibrant than ever before. He also renders it quite transparent that the Civil War failed to solve many of the vexing questions of race and inequality that remain with us in well into the current times.

Taken in total, McCaig's novel is well-crafted, historically intricate, and generally a good read. It should appeal to a variety of audiences who follow Civil War literature or to those who simply enjoy compelling historical fiction. Historians will likely be curious about the source of inspiration for many details in the book; however, the author provides few clues, and states bluntly that has no interest in elucidating them. We can know too much to dream, he says simply. *Canaan* provides readers ample opportunities to dream.

*Jack Trammell teaches and administrates at Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, Virginia. He researches and writes about the Civil War, and topics related to disability. He can be reached at [jtrammel@rmc.edu](mailto:jtrammel@rmc.edu).*