

Literary Cultures of the Civil War

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Review

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Sweet, Timothy, ed. *Literary Cultures of the Civil War*. University of Georgia Press, \$44.95 ISBN 0820349607

Literary scholars give far less attention to the Civil War and especially Reconstruction than do historians. Nonetheless, a revival is underway. Timothy Sweet's *Literary Cultures of the Civil War* collects some of the best work being done. His superb introduction traces developments from the centennial to recent sesquicentennial celebrations of the Civil War. For the centennial, Robert Penn Warren, Daniel Aaron, and Edmund Wilson produced synthetic narratives that caught the attention of a wide public. Writing in the midst of the Civil Rights movement that C. Vann Woodward called a "second Reconstruction," Warren saw the Civil War and Reconstruction in terms of tragedy for their failure to create a "union, which is in the deepest sense a community" (4). Aaron attributed the Civil War's failure to produce a literary epic to the paradox that "Without the Negro, there would have been no Civil War, yet he figured only peripherally in the War literature" (227). As Jillian Spivey Caddell points out, Aaron's thesis anticipated the claim of Toni Morrison and others that a silenced presence of African Americans constitutes American literature. Harboring fears of ideological deployments of state power in the midst of the Cold War, Wilson constructed a narrative in which philosophical pragmatism and literary realism arose from the Civil War's patriotic gore.

According to Sweet, post-centennial work moved from public-sphere criticism to academic criticism. He identifies three trends: a focus on the war's violence; citizenship and nationhood; and expansion of the canon, especially for women and African Americans. Leaving out a fourth trend of "transnationalism," he organizes his collection along similar lines. The first section is "African American Literary Cultures"; the second "Poetics of War"; the third "Mediations of Nation and Region." All of the essays add particular insights to our understanding of the period. But precisely because they are symptomatic, rather than summarize each one, I want to devote the rest this review to making an observation about the present state of bringing literature and history together and then to examine an underlying assumption about the relation between the Civil War and the nation shared by most of the contributors.

I can start with the title, which intentionally or not, recalls *The Cultures of United States Imperialism* (1993). Both collections assume that a full understanding of important events in US history requires a cultural supplement to political and social accounts. "Literary" in Sweet's title, however, signals a disciplinary shift. Twenty-five years ago there was an alliance between the New Historicism in literary studies and cultural history. Now the New Historicism is considered

old, and there is renewed attention to the aesthetic. Nonetheless, a new model for bringing history and literature together has not emerged to replace Stephen Greenblatt's "cultural poetics." On the contrary, Rita Felski, the editor of *New Literary History*, has written a polemic called "Context Stinks." But it matters, as the historian Thomas Brown has recently established, that Henry Timrod, the most accomplished Confederate poet, has mixed blood. Indeed, perhaps more than any other, the field of Civil War and Reconstruction literature is shared by historians who analyze literature while also providing context: David Blight, John David Smith, Alice Fahs, Nina Silber, Drew Gilpin Faust, Lyde Cullen Sizer, Michael T. Bernath, Ian Binnington, K. Stephen Prince, etc. What is lacking is a shared interdisciplinary model for bringing history and literature together. For a group of scholars examining questions of unification, such a model might help unify the field and restore a bit of needed public attention to the period's literature.

My second observation follows from the beginning of Sweet's introduction that cites Fred Pattee on the 50th anniversary of the end of the Civil War. An important figure in the institutionalization of American literary studies, Pattee insisted that the antebellum period F.O. Matthiessen later labelled the "American Renaissance" should not be called our "National Period," because "National it was not." Pattee claims instead that our truly national period began only after the war. According to Sweet, "Pattee seems to have taken Lincoln's nationalizing political program as forecasting an analogous literary program" (1). In fact, Pattee was making a more radical claim. Quoting Hawthorne's observation that in 1864 there was no country because "the States are too various and too extended to form really one country," Pattee was agreeing with then president Woodrow Wilson and others that the United States was not a nation until after the Civil War. To be sure, prior to the war, some, like Daniel Webster and John Marshall, insisted that the United States was a nation. But as William Gladstone put it, "until a people thinks its government is national, it is not national." Even Wilson's arch-enemy Henry Cabot Lodge, who loved Webster, admitted in his *History of the United States* that a "full national consciousness did not exist until we passed through the awful trial of the Civil War."

Lincoln did not fight the war to preserve a nation; he fought it to preserve the Union. Indeed, when Lincoln and Melville are quoted directly in Sweet's collection they explicitly say the perpetuation of "this Union" (73) or "MAINTENANCE OF THE UNION" (99). To be sure, the situation is complicated because Lincoln believed that the United States constituted a nation. But for it to become a nation dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal, the Union first had to be preserved. The Union was at risk because the seceding states felt it was founded by the right to declare independence from the empire of which they were a part. Lincoln disagreed, and he successfully saved the Union. That, however, was only the beginning of the task at hand. With the right of a state to secede denied, the *Union* needed to be reconstructed so that people in all of the states recognized it as a *nation* freed of slavery.

I am belaboring this point because most of the contributors share Sweet's assumption that the literature of the war and its immediate aftermath was part of a task to "reconstitute the nation" (104). In doing so, they underestimate the work needed to be done. To think in terms of a "reunified nation" (236) is to adopt Lincoln's view that a nation preexisted the war, which was not shared by most in the South and some in the North and West. It is also to assume that after the war, Southerners simply had to reaffirm loyalty to their former nation. In fact, the seceding states fought a war against the very notion that the Union was a nation. The cultural work needed

to make Southerners loyal to a nation that would emerge from reconstruction of the Union was immense. The enormousness of that task should, I think, somewhat temper today's understandable criticism of efforts at reconciliation. It is of course horrendous that reconciliation was bought at the price of African Americans, but if we understand--as literature can help us understand--the emotional battles former enemies had to wage in order to reconcile, we can have a better feel for the dilemmas actors at the time faced. And that includes African Americans. Sweet's categories are well chosen, but it would be interesting to imagine one on "Mediations of African Americans and Nation." As Christopher Hager notes in his illuminating essay on the letters of African American soldiers, "The nation to which they were rhetorically adhering was not entirely willing to admit them" (35). The relation of African Americans to the nation that would emerge from Reconstruction was and remains a vexed one. In the section on "Mediations of Nation and Region," Caddell's analysis of Winslow Homer's painting *Near Andersonville* productively explores that relationship.

In addition to inducing loyalty, most of the works treated in the collection participated in a hotly contested debate over what the new nation should look like. In 1867 Charles Sumner gave a speech "Are We a Nation?" For him, we deserved that title only if we followed the path of Radical Reconstruction. But many people who had loyally fought to preserve the Union and abolish slavery disagreed. Some supported Andrew Johnson who vetoed the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the Reconstruction Act of 1867. Others opposed Johnson's first veto but supported his second. Others opposed both vetoes but also opposed Sumner's supplementary civil rights bill that added rights in some public spaces to various economic ones. The literature of the period imagines the full array of these possible nations and the imagined communities and structures of feeling needed to constitute them. It is the task of critics to analyze how individual works bring alive competing visions of the time.

I am purposely focusing attention on Reconstruction because even works written during the war were produced or interpreted in the context of Reconstruction. Reconstruction did not start with the end of the war; it began during the war with efforts in Tennessee and parts of Louisiana and South Carolina. It was controversial from the start as indicated by Lincoln's opposition to the radical Wade/Davis Bill. From this perspective, the fact that the collection's title is *Literary Cultures of the Civil War* is telling. In British literary history it is commonplace to have a period called Restoration literature, not Civil War literature, but in the United States we tend to call even literature written during Reconstruction "Civil War literature." The reason why should be obvious. In Britain "Restoration" followed by the Glorious Revolution easily fits into a progressive narrative leading to a constitutional monarchy. In the United States, memory of the Civil War, in Dudley Miles's phrase, became a "unifier," but the question of what sort of nation should have emerged continues to divide. With successful conclusion of the Civil War, slavery still cast its shadow over the promised land, but Reconstruction, whose task it was to remedy the wrongs of slavery, remains overshadowed by the Civil War in national memory.

A focus on the debate over what sort of nation should have emerged from reconstruction of the Union casts a different light on a number of the essays. For instance, Sweet brilliantly analyzes how Melville uses poetic forms to open "the question of the constitution of the people" (101). But for what sort of nation? Sweet cites Deak Nabors' claim that Melville's line "Victory of Law" signals the poet's support of rule by law over the violence of war and is thus a poetic

enactment of the Fourteenth Amendment. In fact, Melville was much closer to Andrew Johnson who vetoed both the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the Reconstruction Act of 1867 because he felt their provisions for using military rule in peacetime were unconstitutional and thus unlawful. Thus, Sweet's essay invites juxtaposition with John Ernest's equally brilliant analysis of how the forms of William Wells Brown's *The Negro in the American Rebellion* were designed to shape history as well as record it. In doing so, Brown, unlike Melville, contested Presidential Reconstruction. Together the two essays raise the question of whether aesthetic forms are neutral or whether there is a kind of analysis that can help us understand how they affect political positions.

Finally, let me note that, as up-to-date as the collection is, not all of the contributors have kept pace with two developments in Reconstruction historiography. Temporally, the claim that Reconstruction began with the cessation of the war and ended with the Compromise of 1877 has been challenged by a more nuanced understanding of a "long Reconstruction." Spatially, the idea that Reconstruction was confined to the South has been replaced by the notion of a "Greater Reconstruction" of the country. The most promising essay in terms of the former is Samuel Graber's transatlantic analysis of Whitman's war poetry. Showing how a transatlantic perspective can in fact foster nationalism, Graber lets us see how, even as the war was underway, Whitman imagined a sense of the nation that would emerge. Similarly, Kathleen Diffley's final essay on the *Overland Monthly*'s competition with the *Atlantic Monthly* shows how important the West was in creating a national perspective rather than one dominated by the sectionalism of New England. Her outstanding work could productively be expanded by exploring further competition with the *Atlantic* waged by New York's *The Galaxy*. *The Galaxy* published Whitman, Twain, Henry James, and John William De Forest as well as Southerners like Paul Hayne and Edward Pollard, author of *The Lost Cause*. Rebecca Harding Davis hoped it would become a truly "national magazine in which the current thought of every section could find expression as thoroughly as that of New England does in the *Atlantic*." But to mention such possibilities is simply to suggest how much unfinished work remains to be done. *Literary Cultures of the Civil War* provides an excellent point of departure.

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