

So Red the Rose

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Feature Essay: Civil War Obscura

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Young, Stark. *So Red the Rose*. J. S. Sanders & Company, Nashville, 1934. ISBN: 1879941120 pp. 431. Available in reprints.

It is summer, and this is when many of us sneak in the reading of a novel. If one is looking for a book that will not embarrass anyone on the beach, try Stark Young's *So Red the Rose*. Young's book is part of the Southern Classic Series edited by M. E. Bradford. This was an effort during the time of the Lost Cause to create a southern literary tradition. The effort may have eventually failed, but several good books resulted.

So Red the Rose was published in 1934. It was the second best-selling book in America until Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* took the reading public by storm. Paramount Studios paid \$15,000 (remember, it was the Great Depression) for the movie rights. The film starred Randolph Scott, Margaret Sullivan, and introduced a young Robert Cummings. King Vidor directed it, and the film was released in 1935 to admiring audiences.

The book follows two prominent fictional Mississippi planter families whose lives seem to be so closely interwoven that it is sometimes difficult to remember just who belongs where. Portobello is the home of the Bedfords, while Montrose is where the McGehees live. Both families are large, patriarchal, and structured to preserve the fiction of social and racial supremacy. The book is set during the years of the Civil War and immediately after. Sons join the Confederate armies, daughters (and adopted daughters) fall in love and worry—one son dies and is buried on his family's plantation. Husbands drink too much, and wives, while secretly feeling superior to their spouses, support the families into which they have married. At first, almost every character is against disunion, but after the fact, it is supported.

There are slaves. At Portobello, four of the house servants are named "Celie." This allows them to be ordered about interchangeably. The rest of the enslaved people are stock characters, polite to the white folks but living their own lives whenever possible. None become heroes as the story progresses. In fact, there are no heroes, black or white. Instead, there is just an amalgam of

family, kith and kin, visitors, friends, and enslaved. Yet the story and the writing are compelling, as is the point of view of several elite women who feel that war is a man's natural state. By fighting, the declared winner is somehow superior to everyone else. Superiority is greatly valued.

Author Young uses “real” people within his novel. Generals Grant and Sherman—especially Sherman—make appearances, as does their neighbor Jefferson Davis, whom they have known for a long time. Usually, this technique is frowned upon by readers who prefer non-fiction, but Stark Young stays true to the facts about where Grant was and when. Edward, one of the McGehee boys, is a student at the Louisiana Military Academy. He is, therefore, under the immediate tutelage of Sherman and thinks well of the man. The Confederate president, although liked personally, is not thought to be the best choice for president of the Confederacy. He and his fire-eating friends are considered at Montrose and Portobello as preferring to "stir up trouble" than leave the South alone to continue her peculiar institution and familial ways.

One of the more interesting conversations in *So Red the Rose* is between Edward and Lucinda McGehee. They are in their late teens and are discussing their father's odd habit of allowing northern pastors to send a variety of sick parishioners south to stay at Montrose for their health. Apparently, this is the only contact the young people have had with "Yankees." Their words are intriguing:

"It's not so much that these people are not well-born, they don't want to be well-born. It's not that you're trying to descend from Alfred the Great, Papa says, what you want is to be connected with something larger than yourself. But it's no use telling Mr. Munger. If you're Mr. Munger, you want to be self-made." (106)

These words illustrate a primary difference between the North and the South. My southern relatives were forever visiting graveyards and talking about dead people, while my northern kin wanted to know what was happening now and what the plan was for the future. This difference in point of view has been reinforced—for me—many times during research forays into letters and interviews. This is why reading books such as *So Red the Rose* is essential. America is divided on many levels, much like it was in the mid-1800s. Arguing does not lead to understanding. Reading and thinking lead us closer than anything else to developing ideas about how people feel based on their experiences. Several non-fiction books currently exist: *The Presidents vs. the Press*, *Aberration of Mind*, *Private Confederacies*, *Field of Blood*, *The Limits*

of Loyalty, Gathering to Save a Nation are only a few. Each is an illumination of the minds that created the American Civil War. However, sometimes, it is nice to read a novel that does the same thing. I recommend *So Red the Rose* for this exact purpose.

Meg Groeling received her Master's degree in Military History, with a Civil War emphasis, in 2016, from American Public University. Savas Beatie published her first book, The Aftermath of Battle: The Burial of the Civil War Dead, in the fall of 2015, and she has written First Fallen: The Life of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, which Savas Beatie also publishes. In addition, she is a regular contributor to the blog Emerging Civil War. She and her husband live with three cats in a 1927 California bungalow covered with roses on the outside and books.