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David Madden. *Sharpshooter: A Novel of the Civil War.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996. 160 pp. $19.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87049-948-7.

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When Henry Fleming, Stephen Crane's protagonist in *The Red Badge of Courage*, goes off to war, he rides a wave of "war fever"–a mixture of patriotic frenzy and adolescent hormones. "They were fighting finely down there"; he must hurry to become a hero in the "Greek-like struggle." But when Henry arrives on the scene of his first battle–a fictionalized Chancellorsville–all bets are off. Modern war, he soon finds, lacks the niceties of ancient warfare. The guns are too loud to abide eloquent speeches; the officers and generals are hated nitwits. Most devastating, death comes not from the blow of an esteemed opponent after honorable combat, but randomly, silently, inexorably. Henry, stripped of his old myths of war, spends the rest of the narrative lunging from crisis to crisis, peering desperately into the impenetrable smoke, trying to make sense of a battle, of a war that had once promised some sort of epic vision, or at least a patriotic resolution, but now could not even reveal to him "why he was there."

Published in 1892, Crane's book–written by a man born after the Civil War ended–quickly became, and remains to this day, the finest novel written about that conflict. Veterans, impressed by what they saw as the book's accuracy, wrote its author asking what unit he had served in. On his part, Crane, a one-time scholarship athlete at Syracuse, insisted that he learned all he knew about war on the baseball diamond–a curious revision of Wellington's famous quip about Waterloo and the playing fields of Eaton.

In the success of Crane's novel lies a promise and a caution to historians of the Civil War. The promise comes in the affirmation of that generation of readers who knew best (those who had fought the war) that someone who was not there could nonetheless produce an authentic, even moving, portrayal of the war. The caution comes in what Crane was accurate about. His novel offers no discussion of strategy, no sense of any theater of war; no one is sure who won the battle, much less why it was fought. Crane's vagueness on these matters was willful: his book was in part a skeptical response to the hagiographic crooning about the bonhomie of war that marked such publications as *Century Magazine's* "Battles and Leaders of the Civil War." Suffused with the arrogant certainty of hindsight that transformed every encounter into a decisive battle, and retrofit every act of desperation and confusion with clear intention, the popular series had parsed wholesale destruction into a tidy narrative of personal bravery and cowardice, national success and secessionist failure on the field of honor. Crane saw through the bombast to a need of veterans and noncombatants alike to fashion narratives rooted in the willy nilly of personal experience. What he wrote was a book true to the way the confusion and shock of battle produced, even as it happened, a tide of prevarication, rationalization, and sheer lying strong enough to wash away, and finally supplant, even the most stubborn facts. If his book suggests that you needn't have been there to understand the war, it was because, in the end, there was no "there" there. The Civil War,like any part of the past, is as much what we make of it as it is what makes us.

Enter thirteen-year-old Willis Carr almost exactly a century later, the narrator and protagonist from the hills of Tennessee in David Madden's novel, *Sharpshooter*. He, too, leaves home to fight for the Union, stowing away as it were on a guerrilla expedition that aims to make palpable in burned bridges and general mayhem the millenialist fulminations of great-grandfather Carr's beloved William G. "Parson" Brownlow–the Knoxville visionary (and later Tennessee governor) who saw the Union cause as part of divine revelation in history. And like Henry Fleming, and unlike the rest of his family, Willis is less interested in causes than in doing "something in the Civil War, … something *different*." And different indeed is his career. Thrown into a Knoxville prison for Union sympathizers, he makes the obvious decision when offered a choice between execution and serving with the Confederates. Soon, his hunting prowess makes him one of General James Longstreet's sharpshooters. He serves with the general for two years, at Sharpsburg, Gettysburg,

Chickamauga "and many other places that I couldn't remember a name for." When Longstreet is wounded by friendly fire at the Wilderness, Carr decides he has had enough, deserts, and kills a Union soldier for his uniform. Once again he is captured, sent to Andersonville, where he yet again escapes the firing squad to become a guard at the prison he had just inhabited.

There is more, much more: obviously Madden works on a much larger historical canvas than did Crane. And while I have no way of verifying this, he seems to rely less on baseball for his sense of the war than on careful research. (In a note to the reader, Madden himself claims in a note to have consulted more than a thousand books–well over six books for each page in the novel.) From what I could tell, Willis moves through a world as true to the historical record as any novel has a right to be. Ultimately, however, Madden is not interested in the kind of past that can be verified. Nor is he interested in giving us a kind of realist "good read" in the tradition of, say, *The Killer Angels*. Willis may experience enough of the war to fill a novel of Dostoevski-like proportions, but like Henry before him, that experience is so confusing, so fundamentally untranslatable, that his whole career in the war feels to him "like one battle, interrupted by dreams. Or one dream interrupted by battles." Paradoxically, he survives the war feeling he had missed it. Willis's dissociation grows more acute when he begins to hear from veterans and civilians alike a growing compendium of tales about famous generals' last words, feats of extraordinary heroism, and moments of staggering ironies. Such stories, of course, are both fragments of myth and (Greek-like) epic, and the common material of bombast. In Madden's world, though, such tales may serve to certify a "real" or "official" narrative–one insensitive to, even dismissive of, the experience of battle–but their telling by ordinary folk also allows them to claim some small, but significant, part in that epic. It takes Willis a decade to file his first claim for recognition, which comes in the form of "My Story": the sparely narrated first fifty-two pages of Madden's book. It is not enough, however, to overcome his alienation, so he sets out to retrace his career as a soldier, "moving toward whatever I might discover, trying to get the War, as I experienced it, on target."

The sharpshooter metaphor here is misleading; his goal is not so much to recover his experience (this is no tale of repressed memory syndrome), as to acquire the resources for telling his story. In fact, it is immediately clear that, given his uncertain memory, there is no raw "experience" to recover. And the harder he looks for it, the more it recedes. He hears too many conflicting stories, he meets too many myopic storytellers, and encounters too many contradictory facts to ever get a clear vision of what happened. Even when he does marshal "most of the available–essential–facts," about his campaigns, he has to admit that "[m]ost of what I know now about the war that I fought and killed in, I got from eyewitnesses later–and from books." In short, his own experience gets caught up in a process of revision that is beyond his control, which he attributes to "the legend-making impulse in people [that] selects actual ingredients and immerses them in imagined ones."

In a sense, of course, Madden's protagonist moves through a world more recognizable as postmodern than postbellum–a broken landscape of stories and half-truths that obscure, even as they acknowledge, the irreducible power of war to transform all it touches. And Willis does eventually arrive at some sort of late twentieth-century resolution of his alienation by returning in memory to his encounter at Andersonville with an ex-slave literate in the Cherokee alphabet. But I would like to chart a slightly different course through the novel in order to highlight what Madden suggests about what it means to tell a history about the war. For what is clearly at stake for Willis is that he must become a tourist of his own past in order to become a historian of his own experience. At the core of Madden's book, then, is the story of how Willis Carr, soldier, becomes Willis Carr, historian. And like Crane before him, Madden has in mind a very specific kind of history, one that any writer–fictional or nonfictional–can tell.

The nature of this history emerges clearly in a particular encounter. As Willis finds his way home, he comes across a copy of Alexander Gardner's "Sketchbook of the Civil War." Leafing through the album of photographs, he finds missing one of the best known images of the war: Timothy O'Sullivan's poignant photograph, "The Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter, Gettysburg." The caption, however, with Gardner's maudlin fiction about the dying rebel and his bleached bones (which Madden quotes verbatim), is powerful enough to leave Willis "queasy" and filled with foreboding: "I expected that I would sooner or later run across that photograph." When he finally does see the image late in the novel, we learn why the caption had affected Willis so: he had been one of the "Rebel Sharpshooters" to operate out of Devil's Den; it was behind the wall he built that Gardner and O'Sullivan had set their props–gun, knapsack, and a body they had carried seventy yards to its final resting place. Willis knows the image is a fake, or at best, a "fiction" (it is not a sharpshooter's rifle next to the body), which confirms his sense that neither photographer could "see what I saw and imagined." At the same time, he cannot avoid the

way the image uncannily brings him face to face with his great fear: O'Sullivan and Gardner "faked my own death in one of the most famous photographs of the war." Moreover, as Willis recognizes, the image, no matter how inauthentic, had become powerful enough as a popular "icon" to make that death real, true, for the viewers who saw it. Including, almost, Willis Carr.

In effect, then, in a gesture that is nothing but contemporary to the 1990s, Willis rejects the image's accuracy even as he acknowledges its power to fix (to borrow a photographic phrase) reality. As he knows when he gazes at the photograph, the story of Gardner's "forgery" is important, but it does not invalidate the image's iconic status. Its truth is contingent, relative, the product of the vision not only of the photographers and their assistants, perhaps even of the gravediggers and other artists at the battlefield in those bleak days following the battle, but of all those who had gazed on the image and found their Civil War. Given this indeterminacy, Willis Carr, and more important, David Madden, produces an account that takes as seriously the lies, the rationalizations, and the myths–in short, the products of imagination–as it does the necessarily incomplete facts of the past. In these terms, history is not strictly an account of what happened; the past is not some perfectly focused target awaiting the sights of sharpshooting historians. Rather, for Madden, history is an account of accounts of what happened–how it was talked about, pictured, celebrated, reviled, and even imagined.

Needless to say, then, *Sharpshooter* is no *Killer Angels*. Nor is it, for all of its affinities, *The Red Badge of Courage*. It is, however, a novel that takes its history very seriously.

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