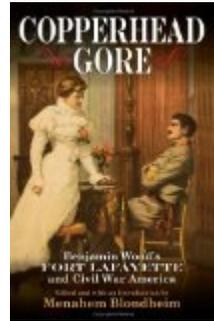


Menahem Blondheim, ed. *Copperhead Gore: Benjamin Wood's Fort Lafayette and Civil War America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006. xi + 291 pp. \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21847-6; \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34737-4.

Reviewed by Thomas E. Rodgers (Department of History, University of Southern Indiana)
Published on H-Indiana (November, 2006)



The Copperhead Perspective

In *Copperhead Gore*, Menahem Blondheim presents Benjamin's Wood's Civil War novel, *Fort Lafayette; or, Love and Secession* (1862). He provides an extensive introduction to the novel, a glossary and explanatory notes for various references in it, and two speeches made by Wood in Congress during the war. Benjamin Wood was the editor of the *New York Daily News* and a Democratic congressman from New York during the Civil War. Fernando Wood, the mayor of New York City and head of the Mozart Hall faction of the city's Democratic Party, was an older brother who helped his mother raise Benjamin after their father's death. Wood was seen by contemporaries as one of the most notorious Copperheads, a term used by Republicans for northerners who most strongly opposed the Union war effort. In presenting Wood's novel and speeches, Blondheim hopes to give voice to a dissenting wartime minority whose perspective, in his view, has been largely neglected. Blondheim also contends that Wood's *Fort Lafayette* is "the Civil War's single pacifist novel" (p. 1).

Blondheim is a professor of communications and American studies at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He has published a number of works on communications in the United States during the nineteenth century. His expertise is evident in the eighty pages of background material in the preface and introduction. He provides the reader with a brief biographical background on Wood, but spends most of his introductory material analyzing Wood as an editor, novelist, political speaker, and Copperhead. Wood was most outspoken in his editorials,

which were designed for the Democratic audience that read his paper. He denounced Lincoln, urged opposition to his policies, engaged in vicious race-baiting, and insisted that the South would win the war. The *New York Daily News* suspended publication during 1862 after it was banned from using the U.S. Mail for distribution to its subscribers outside of the city. It was during this suspension that Wood wrote his novel. Blondheim describes how Wood toned down his rhetoric in his Congressional speeches and the novel as he hoped to reach an audience beyond his Democratic supporters. Blondheim also places the novel within the context of the literary conventions of the times, including a fascinating discussion of parallels between Wood's work and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852).

In *Fort Lafayette*, Wood presents his political positions within the context of an engaging story containing action and romance. Its main theme is that the Civil War represents an unnatural separation of the American people. The main characters are Virginia planter Beverly Weems, his sister Oriana, and his two college friends Harold Hare of Rhode Island and Arthur Wayne of Vermont. The friendships of these four, along with the romantic ties between Oriana and both Hare and Wayne, represent what Wood sees as the normal amity between Americans of the different sections. In fact, the villains of the story, Seth Rawbon, a Massachusetts man who has moved to the South to engage in the slave trade, and Philip Searle, a Virginian who has moved to the North where he engages in the white slave trade, are constantly

trying to undermine intersectional relations. The novel ranges over a number of locales, but much of it takes place near Richmond, in New York City, and at the first Battle of Bull Run. Many episodes are quite contrived, as characters seem constantly to just happen to be in the right place to encounter another character. The primary hero of the book is Arthur Wayne, who is meant to represent Wood's position. Wayne refuses to be caught up in the war excitement or to fight in such an unnatural conflict. He is framed for treason by one of the villains and sent to Fort Lafayette, which was a prison on an island in New York harbor in which a number of individuals who were deemed to be disloyal were incarcerated. Wayne is eventually freed, but, weakened by his ordeal, he dies as a martyr for peace in a dramatic deathbed scene that ends the novel.

The two congressional speeches that Blondheim includes nicely complement the novel. In these speeches (especially the first one), Wood explicitly spells out the views and positions that he had interwoven into his novel, especially, the comity of the sections and the need for a negotiated end to the war. The speeches thus help the reader to understand the political content of *Fort Lafayette*. They also help to explain a remarkable attempt by Wood to emphasize the connectedness of the sections by starting an intersectional personal column in the *Daily News* when it resumed publication in 1863. The column allowed people to place personal items in his paper for loved ones in the South that would be copied and reprinted in southern newspapers. Blondheim does a nice job of relating this experiment to the themes of Wood's novel and speeches in the introduction.

Blondheim, as one would expect, is most thorough and convincing in his discussions of communications and literature in the mid-nineteenth century. His comments on politics and ideology are not always as thorough or cogent. Blondheim's contention that Copperheads such as Wood were political moderates is not convincing. They were moderates only in the sense that they did not side with either the dominant group in the South or the North. They had their own agenda that they forcefully and aggressively promoted before, during, and after the war. They were not dispassionate observers of two zealous factions, but rather a third quite zealous faction. Wood was quite good at promoting his positions by leaving out things that might undermine them. Blondheim notes how slavery as an issue is downplayed in the novel and speeches, but fails to note some other omitted things. Especially important is the absence of the Slave Power Conspiracy concept that united Republican factions and was

a major motivation for fighting the South. Wood ignores this concept and events such as the Dred Scott case that were seen by Republicans as part of the conspiracy.

Blondheim's promotion of Wood as a pacifist also seems unconvincing. In both the novel and the speeches, Wood does provide a number of broadly worded denunciations of war dressed in sentimental rhetoric, but he also includes praise for various heroic warriors of earlier American wars. In addition, the antiwar Wayne character in the novel flatly states that he would fight if his home state were invaded, and Wood, according to Blondheim's introduction, was involved in a Confederate plot late in the war designed to create violent uprisings in the North. Wood also implies that heroism in war is a hallmark of freedom loving Americans in his oft-stated contention that the South will win. Democratic ideology portrayed any man worthy of liberty as being willing to fight to the death for his freedom. Thus, Democrats in the North expected the men of the South to fight fiercely and never surrender; they would either win or be subdued only in a bloodbath. Thus the only feasible way to restore the Union would be by negotiation, not force. This ideological perspective that Wood exhibits so well is a major reason why northern Democrats continued to call for negotiations long after any neutral observer could see any hope for their success.

In fact, what makes Wood's novel and speeches so interesting is not that they reveal a moderate or a pacifist, but instead that they so well portray the world as northern Democrats saw and understood it. Some of Wood's views, such as his position on the right of secession, might be somewhat different from those of most northern Democrats, but much else that he has to say is broadly representative of the views of party members. Not only the explicitly political aspects of his work, but also the implications of some passages are instructive. A good example of this is Wood's portrayal of women and blacks, and what it says about Democratic gender and racial presuppositions. Democrats believed that both women and African American men lacked the will and assertiveness that they saw as central to full citizenship. Anyone who has the qualities of a free man would never be a slave, and, therefore, anyone who had been a slave could not possibly deserve or be capable of exercising male rights of citizenship. For Democrats, only white males had the qualities needed to play a full role in war, politics, and the public sphere in general. These viewpoints are reflected in the novel, as white male characters largely dominate and drive the action. All but one of the female characters are weak creatures to be protected by men. The one

exception is Moll Searle, who runs a brothel and appears to be a kind of unfeminine aberration. However, even this aggressive woman is overpowered in the end by men. Wood's slave characters embody the Sambo stereotype—loyal, obedient, happy, and childlike. The character Oriana sums up Wood's position on slaves in a passage in which she contends emancipation would be a horrible thing to impose on blacks because they are utterly incapable of taking care of themselves. For Wood and other Democrats, Republican positions on slavery and emancipation were absurd because in their worldview slavery

was beneficial to blacks and it was ludicrous to believe black males were worthy to be full-fledged citizens of the republic.

On the whole, this is a stimulating, well-done book. My criticisms primarily concern things I would like to have seen added. I think that students as well as Civil War scholars would find this work to be interesting. Assigning *Copperhead Gore* to undergraduates could be a very good way of introducing them to wartime Democrats.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-indiana>

Citation: Thomas E. Rodgers. Review of Blondheim, Menahem, ed., *Copperhead Gore: Benjamin Wood's Fort Lafayette and Civil War America*. H-Indiana, H-Net Reviews. November, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12545>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.