

Peter H. Wood. *Near Andersonville: Winslow Homer's Civil War*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010. 134 pp. Illustrations. \$18.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-05320-5.

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## Winslow Homer: Emancipationist

History is at its most compelling when presented by a master storyteller. This slender but provocative volume is the result of Peter H. Wood's recent Nathan Huggins lectures at Harvard. Although the Huggins lecture series is still in its infancy, past participation by distinguished scholars such as Leon Litwack, David Brion Davis, and Steven Hahn, among others, indicates the growing significance of the event. Wood readily admits being energized by the opportunity, as he explains in the introduction, to combine his lifelong scholarly interests in "American race relations and in the artistry of Winslow Homer." Despite having already published multiple works on Winslow Homer, Wood focuses here on the "long-neglected" painting *Near Andersonville*. According to Wood, this painting contains the potential, especially when considered in the context of the Civil War sesquicentennial, to prompt Americans "to think in new ways" about the meaning and legacy of the old conflict (p. 2).

To prove his case about the power and endurance of *Near Andersonville*, Wood delivered three lectures, and the book retains that structure. Chapter 1, "The Picture in the Attic," functions as an extended introduction to the painting's curious history. Completed in 1866, the painting was originally owned by Sarah Kellogg—who died shortly after acquiring it—and so for generations the painting lay forgotten in a New Jersey attic. Not until the 1960s was the painting discovered, and while it was clearly valuable, none of Kellogg's descendants knew even "the picture's title," let alone "the name of the artist

who made it" (p. 27). Wood also uses this section of the book to provide a brief biography of Homer and to explain the impact of his childhood in the uniquely abolitionist cauldron that was antebellum Boston in shaping the artist's "keen, if abstract, awareness of the slavery issue" (p. 18). The chapter functions well as a virtuoso piece of historical deduction, as Wood reveals the peculiar connections that linked Homer's interest in the emancipationist legacy of the Civil War with that of Kellogg, who died while teaching newly freed African Americans in South Carolina during Reconstruction.

Having established *Near Andersonville* as a symbol of emancipationist memory, Wood turns his attention in chapter 2, "Behind Enemy Lines," to exploring the particular motivation that led Homer to create the painting. Wood's story becomes much more tenuous here. Although he provides an overview of the terrifying history of Andersonville Prison (the notorious Confederate stockade that claimed the lives of 13,000 Union soldiers) and recaps the spectacular failure of Stoneman's Raid in 1864 (which instead of freeing Union prisoners, created more of them), he makes no definitive connection between the impact of these tragedies and Homer. Beyond the painting's title, Wood offers little concrete evidence of Homer's reaction to these horrors. Phrases such as "but I take" creep into Wood's rhetoric, and sentences start to begin with "if" (pp. 38-39, 43-44). Wood also seems to reach for connections between Homer and the events of 1864, at one point building an awkward, generalized comparison of Homer's struggles to understand

the meaning of the Civil War with those of Abraham Lincoln (p. 44). The result is definitely the least convincing chapter of the three, as Wood stretches his interpretation past the point of historical proof.

In the final chapter, “The Woman in the Sunlight,” Wood at last turns to the painting itself and explains why he believes that *Near Andersonville* remains important as “a contemporary picture of enduring interest” (p. 60). Although the painting’s title refers to the infamous prison, Andersonville itself does not appear in the picture, and only in the corner of the work do prisoners appear as they are marched towards their doom. Wood marvels at how Homer “inverts traditional hierarchies” by focusing the piece on a black female slave rather than the usual images of “Johnny Reb and Billy Yank” (p. 85). He argues that taking this “surprising angle” on interpreting the Civil War makes the painting nothing less than “a revolutionary piece of art” (p. 85). Wood explains that, like Thomas Nast (who worked for *Harper’s Weekly* along with Homer), Homer recognized that Andersonville’s existence and the imprisonment of thousands of whites on behalf of the effort to destroy slavery, “reveals the entire war as a three-sided, not a two-sided struggle, something most Americans are only gradually managing to grasp”

(p. 86). It is an appealing and timely conclusion, and while this chapter also contains more distracting speculation from Wood—for instance, he insists on arbitrarily referring to the depicted female slave as Hagar so that he can discuss possible biblical influences on American popular culture in the mid-1800s—Wood successfully argues that a closer look at Homer’s work not only reveals an artist ahead of his time, but a painting that urges viewers to acknowledge the essential meaning of the Civil War.

Reaction to this brief work will no doubt vary. Given its origin as a lecture series, this book looks like more of a sketch than a finished product. The pacing is curious, as Wood spends more time explaining the context of the painting’s backstory than he does interpreting the painting itself. And while all readers will appreciate Wood’s accessible prose, the volume lacks a bibliography, forcing scholars to navigate through the footnotes. But if one accepts Wood’s claim that “lost meanings are worth recovering and debating,” then this book, despite its suggestive nature and frustrating leaps of faith, not only reminds us of the enduring relevance of Civil War memory, but also that weaving a story remains the essence of the historical craft (p. 82).

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