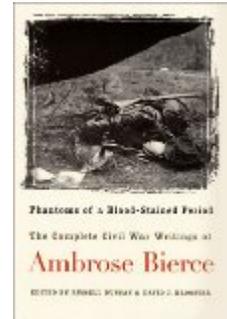


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Russell Duncan, David J. Klooster, eds. *Phantoms of a Blood-Stained Period: The Complete Civil War Writings of Ambrose Bierce*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002. xiv + 343 pp. \$60.00 (cloth) ISBN 1-55849-327-1; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55849-328-5.

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## Writer as Witness

### Writer as Witness

*Phantoms of a Blood-Stained Period: The Complete Civil War Writings of Ambrose Bierce*, edited by Russell Duncan and David J. Klooster, is a useful addition to the small assortment of Bierce collections available to students and scholars today. Bierce was perhaps the most significant American writer to have actually been a soldier throughout the war. For this reason alone he would be worth reading. But Bierce holds special interest for the student of the war because his work was so markedly different from most first-hand accounts, particularly the revisionist regimental histories that littered the literary landscape during the decades after the war. Rather than glorify the war and the soldiers who fought it, Bierce insisted upon exposing the bloodiness, brutality, stupidity, fear and cowardice to which he had been witness.

Bierce genuinely deplored the war, but he also seemed to revel in his reputation as the foremost malcontent of his generation. Born in Meigs County, Ohio in 1842, Bierce's family was living in Indiana when the war broke out. He joined the local regiment, the 9th Indiana Volunteer Infantry, and saw action in most of the major battles in the west, including Chickamauga, Missionary Ridge and Shiloh. He earned fifteen commendations and a serious head injury that caused him pain for the rest of life. After the war, Bierce pursued a career in journalism. By 1868 he was a regular columnist for the *San Francisco Examiner*, where his invective became infamous. In 1913 he moved to Mexico and disappeared.

Much of Bierce's writing seems a bit dated or unsophisticated today. His tales of the supernatural fail to chill in an era jaded by Stephen King novels. Likewise, excerpts from his famous *The Devil's Dictionary*, so popular at the time, seem rather simple and curmudgeonly by today's sophisticated standards of political satire. Bierce's greatest legacy lies in his first-hand accounts of the war as he lived it, most of which appeared as columns in the *Examiner*. His journalism is downright literary, with a spare, but searing style that still holds up well today.

There have been a few collections of Bierce's journalism and letters published since the 1909-1912 publication of the *Collected Works*. And there is at least one other Civil War collection, which came out coincidentally in 2002. *Shadows of Blue and Gray: The Civil War Writings of Ambrose Bierce*, edited by Brian M. Thomsen, collects all of Bierce's short fiction relating to the war, but only includes a handful of excerpts from his memoirs. Where the Duncan and Klooster collection has the advantage over this competitor is that *Phantoms* contains all the pertinent material. It even includes a few letters and some poetry, a special treat in spite of the fact that Bierce is not particularly admired for his poetry. More importantly, the Duncan and Klooster collection includes footnotes that help the reader to understand the historical context of many pieces, which the Thomsen collection does not. And so *Phantoms of a Blood-Stained Period* is the preferred collection for students of Civil War history. Students of American literature will also find much to appreciate.

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