

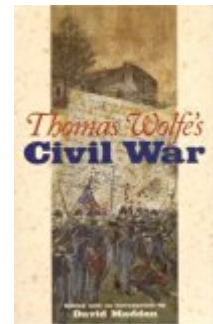
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Madden, ed. *Thomas Wolfe's Civil War*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004. viii + 215 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8173-5094-9.

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It makes sense to remind oneself, every now and then, that even though Daniel Aaron called the War of the Rebellion the “Unwritten War” there have been, to date, more than 1,200 Civil War novels, and that many of the more prominent authors of American literature have at least written a story or two with a Civil War subject. The roster of names includes some unlikely customers like Upton Sinclair and F. Scott Fitzgerald. It also includes, more obviously, Thomas Wolfe. His Southern background is well known, and his brilliant short story “Chickamauga” adorns collections such as the anthology of Civil War stories edited for the Civil War centennial by the late great Civil War novelist Shelby Foote, as well as less discriminating collections such as *Confederate Battle Stories* (1992).[1] Told in a first-person narrative, it is the story of a friendship and of how one of the friends, Jim Weaver, became so enamoured of Martha Patton the week they joined up that, from that day on, he became a changed man. The narrative proceeds at an “oral,” uneven pace, and the narrator finally arrives at the point when Jim is killed at Chickamauga. The fact that the narrator himself later marries beautiful Martha Patton, however, is hidden in a half-sentence so as to pass by almost unnoticed, when it should have been so important. It is one great story.

However, Thomas Wolfe did not, and for good reasons, make the cut for the volume of criticism *Classics of Civil War Fiction* (1991), edited by David Madden and Peggy Bach (which is now a classic in itself). Madden calls Wolfe “a major contributor to Civil War literature” (p. 1). This comes as somewhat of a surprise, given that Wolfe’s body of Civil War writings extends to just one very good story, two good ones (“The Four Lost Men” and “His Father’s Earth”), and one rather weak play. To

this may be added those extrapolations from Wolfe’s novels which focus on the Civil War and which are gathered here but which were not planned as independent publications. According to Madden: “Thomas Wolfe, I am convinced, could have written and probably would have written, that great American Civil War novel” (p. 7). This, in turn, harkens back to a call first heard in American letters in about 1815; it constitutes a latter-day continuation of the search for the “Great American Novel.” Madden contends that “the great American novel must also be the great Civil War novel because that war provides the single most provocative and complex perspective on the entire American experience” (p. 5). Which will, in Madden’s words, make it mandatory for that Great American Novel to be written by a Southerner since “there is no such thing as a Northern novel, nor a true Civil War novel by a Northerner because there is no such thing as the North or a northerner, except in the minds of southerners” (p. 3). In view of Stephen Crane’s undisputed classic and arguably most widely known Civil War novel, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), and in view of Stephen Becker’s beautiful little gem *When the War Is Over* (1970), this is an interesting statement. It might also be argued that a “great American Civil War novel” is well-nigh impossible, especially if written from a decidedly Southern view, because of the almost inevitable partisan slant that already mars hundreds of Civil War novels. Still, we have a great and remarkable Southern Civil War novel in William Faulkner’s *Absalom! Absalom!* (1936), but it receives surprisingly short notice from Madden. Instead, we are informed that in this novel “Faulkner covers the same time frame as Wolfe’s Civil War play *Mannerhouse*” (p. 3), and that “Faulkner’s own all-embracing Yoknapatapha saga was, comparatively, not a planned work, but a

work that evolved” (p. 4).

Madden is probably correct that his view on Thomas Wolfe takes into account the pervasiveness of the Civil War as a constitutive power in his biography and worldview. Unlike Fitzgerald, Sinclair, and others who wrote Civil War stories mainly because they were marketable, for Wolfe the topic may indeed have been part of his mental framework. Judging from the material presented here, however, the contention that Wolfe was cut out to write a Civil War novel, if not *the* Great American Civil War Novel, will probably remain parahistory of the type that asks “what if Jackson had not been shot at Chancellorsville.”

The collection itself is a welcome addition to Wolfe and, more generally, Civil War literature scholarship. There is even one real trouvaille in these texts: Madden has carved another great piece of Civil War short fiction from the bulk of Wolfe’s (unfinished) novel *The Hills Beyond* (1941). The story, “The Plumed Knight,” follows Theodore Joyner’s career from incompetence in everything to teaching school and even setting up one of the many clandestine military academies in the South—and on to the war, and to classic Southern Colonelcy. This

story shows Wolfe at his best: witty, satirical, fully in command of his topic. He is hilarious, yet not without sympathy, when writing about the war and its effects: “It became a kind of folk-religion. And under its soothing, otherworldly spell, the South began to turn its face away from the hard and ugly realities of daily living that confronted it on every hand, and escaped into the soft dream of vanished glories—imagined glories—glories that never had been” (p. 211).

And there is one minute detail which even goes beyond that, and which just may tie Wolfe back in with contemporary popular culture—the location of “Joyner Height’s Academy.” “The people in the town, however, just went on calling the hill Hogwart as they had always done, and to Theodore’s intense chagrin they even dubbed the academy Hogwart, too” (p. 204). Anyone else wonder whether Joanne K. Rowling ever read Thomas Wolfe? Note

[1]. Shelby Foote, *Chickamauga: And Other Civil War Stories* (New York: Delta, 1993 reissue); *Confederate Battle Stories*, Frank D. McSherry, Martin Greenberg, and Charles Waugh, eds. (Little Rock: August House, 1992).

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