

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

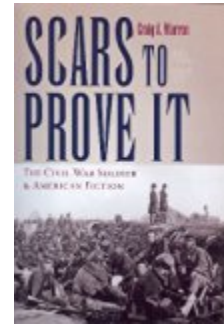


Craig A. Warren. *Scars to Prove It: The Civil War Soldier and American Fiction*. Kent: Kent State University Press, 2009. x + 223 pp. paper, ISBN 978-1-60635-015-7.

Reviewed by Will Kaufman (University of Central Lancashire)

Published on H-CivWar (February, 2010)

Commissioned by Hugh F. Dubrulle



I Wuz There, Where Wuz You?

Craig A. Warren's study is an ambitious attempt to establish the relationship between Civil War fiction and historical sources—in particular, veterans' narratives—on which this fiction is based. The aim is to explore the ways in which “authors of fiction have embraced, celebrated, resisted, and rejected those published reflections, while in pursuit of their own artistic and cultural objectives” (p. 5). The designation “ambitious” refers to Warren's gamble, which is to reduce the possible range of thousands of fictional sources to only seven novels: Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936), Caroline Gordon's *None Shall Look Back* (1937), William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and *The Unvanquished* (1938), Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels* (1974), and Howard Bahr's *The Judas Field* (2006).

Warren approaches Crane's novel as an exercise in inclusion: it is a project to wrest the Civil War narrative away from those veterans whose memoirs “represented a formidable obstacle to any nonveteran wishing to write about the war” in the last two decades of the nineteenth century (p. 10). In this regard, Crane was staking his claim against the narrative ownership of Wilber F. Hinman, Alonzo F. Hill, John D. Billings, Frank Wilkeson, and Warren Lee Goss, among others; but Crane was also up against “a climate of nostalgia and martial exaltation,” although “his powers as a writer far exceeded those of most former soldiers” (pp. 18, 23). Warren points to Crane's use of irony—which early readers either missed completely or which infuriated those who *had* perceived

it—arguing that Crane was actually being faithful to veterans, such as Sam Watkins and Andrew B. Wells, who had themselves employed irony to demythologize or deflate the windier reflections of the literary generals. Ultimately, Warren argues, it was Crane who “shaped expectations for writing about the war” (p. 36).

Warren presents Mitchell and Gordon as literary agitators for the recognition of women as “true Civil War veterans” (p. 5). His thesis is that both authors set out to amend “narratives that defined the war in terms of the battlefield alone,” in the process helping to “alter the role of the soldier's memoir in American letters” (p. 40). In turning to *Gone with the Wind*, Warren places special emphasis on the character of Melanie Wilkes—in his estimation, “the character on whom the novel ultimately rests its conclusions about gender and war,” thwarting “gender expectations in a way the iconoclastic Scarlett never could” (pp. 48, 49). Through her utilization of Eliza Andrews's *The War-Time Journal of a Georgia Girl, 1864-1865* and Mary Ann Harris Gay's *Lie in Dixie during the War*, Mitchell was “less interested in overturning men's claims on the war than in making room for women.” Yet she was obliged to “confront the published words of the war's male participants” (p. 49). Gordon, by her own admission, had set out “to write the same kind of a novel a man would write,” but did so by turning her back on the convention of alternating scenes “between men at the front and women at home” (p. 62). Instead, she upset the norm “by bringing women directly onto the battle field and into direct contact with the army” (p. 70). Moreover, Gordon

also challenged those Southern officers' wives who, "by virtue of their connection to the Confederacy's political and military chiefs, felt licensed to write about warfare" (p. 66).

Examining the civilian narrators in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Unvanquished*, Warren argues that Faulkner could grapple with the issues of race and race relations "only by first demythologizing and demilitarizing the South's Civil War," thus helping to "revise nearly seventy years of narratives about the conflict" (pp. 5, 84). In this reading, Faulkner was acting on his "fear that a representation of combat would consume his narratives about the war ... blotting out the cultural and historical context of the fighting" (p. 89). His aim in both *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Unvanquished*, then, was to move "battlefield heroics into the wings of Southern memory" and use the "civilian vantage point to challenge the most basic tenets of the Lost Cause" (pp. 91, 106). Warren does not shrink from engagement with Faulkner's reactionary statements on race and the unlikelihood of black equality, noting that "*The Unvanquished* adheres to a southern literary tradition that denied African Americans equal space and a narrative voice" (p. 97). In spite of Faulkner's "allegiance to certain regional and racist traditions," Warren argues, "*The Unvanquished* offers a more complex vision of the Civil War and race relations than it may at first seem," especially in the relationship between Bayard and Ringo—a "relationship between white and black Americans [that] eclipses the physical war as fought in the fields and waters" (pp. 98, 99).

In his exploration of "the triumph of the individual" in Shaara's *The Killer Angels*, Warren points to the "circle of myth, fiction, and history" growing out of Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain's *The Passing of the Armies* and perpetuated in Shaara's novel (p. 119). According to Warren, other narratives by Edward Porter Alexander, Jubal Early, John Bell Hood, James Longstreet, and Arthur James Lyon Fremantle all filter into *The Killer Angels*, which—Warren argues—contains "the entire Civil War between its covers" despite its exclusive focus on the battle of Gettysburg (p. 129). Shaara's "compressions of history," Warren argues, enable a fictional account of "democratic America's triumph over Old World aristocracy" (p. 135). Warren also presents *The Killer Angels* as a reflection of the postwar Reconciliation movement of which Chamberlain was an example, "a Northern hero who understood the war beyond the emancipationist vision" (p. 147).

Warren's concluding chapter on the "haunted veter-

ans" in Bahr's *The Judas Field* examines what the author calls "an excellent example of how recent Civil War fiction has responded to the human legacy of America's twentieth-century military conflicts" (p. 162). Warren demonstrates how Bahr, himself a Vietnam veteran, "at times borrowed from the memories of twentieth-century veterans in order to add texture and authenticity to his picture of Confederate soldiers" (p. 162). What yokes the Civil War and America's twentieth-century wars together is the shared sense of "outwardly 'ordinary' lives" concealing "a dark current of memory and violence" (p. 166). The *Judas Field* thus provides a hearkening back to the novel that begins Warren's study, *The Red Badge of Courage*, enabling a circular critique that, for the most part, works well.

There are two minor difficulties here. Warren is sensitive enough to anticipate queries over his selection of representative titles—an inevitability for all authors attempting to make some sense of the great mass of Civil War fiction. Warren claims that, in the end, his selection is based on the fact that each of his seven novels has "been judged, by the public and scholars alike, to have contributed something meaningful to American literature and culture" (p. 6). This is undoubtedly true, but the same can be said for most other Civil War novels. Thus, Warren's case for this particular selection needs to be made more convincingly. Granted, this is perhaps a problem that no scholar can surmount: there will always be someone asking why (for instance) Barry Hannah does not get mentioned in the discussion of the Civil War-Vietnam War connection. However, there are indeed some missed opportunities here. Warren expresses regret that his "choice of works may seem to suggest that white novelists alone write Civil War fiction," but concludes that his selection of novels is an accurate reflection of the fact that "the overwhelming majority of Civil War narratives have been the work of white authors" (p. 6). It would have been good to see Warren going against this grain of convenience and opening up a new route into what is still the relatively unexplored territory of black Civil War writing. Similarly, in his exploration of women's narratives, Warren makes brief mention of the scholarship on distaff soldiers and gives a nod to Ann Rinaldi's *Girl in Blue* (2001). Yet again, there is a missed opportunity here—especially in the context of the discussion of Mitchell and Gordon—to examine women's martial narratives (Loreta Velazquez's *The Woman in Battle* (1876) and Sarah Emma Edmonds's *Nurse and Spy in the Union Army* (1864) are two that come to mind, along with the perceptible genre of woman-in-battle fiction that they

inspired).

One other minor drawback is a tendency for Warren to make himself a hostage to fortune with superlative or reductive declarations that do not help to advance his argument and are probably more trouble than they are worth. For instance, he writes: "More than any other novel, *The Killer Angels* ..." (p. 6). Perhaps yes, perhaps no: but already the argument is a wearying one. Again: "The message of *The Killer Angels* can be clarified in a few statements ..." (p. 124). While we may, happily, be in a post-theory age, one of the lessons that cannot be thrown

out with our old deconstruction textbooks is the fact that novels inevitably contain a myriad of "messages." What service does it do to the novel—or to the experience of reading—to reduce it all to one message?

These two reservations are not meant to detract from what is overall an important, informed, and eloquently argued study. *Scars to Prove It* is a valuable contribution to the field of Civil War literary scholarship and it certainly brings new perspectives to what many would consider to be exhaustively mined fictional sources.

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

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

Citation: Will Kaufman. Review of Warren, Craig A., *Scars to Prove It: The Civil War Soldier and American Fiction*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. February, 2010.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=26260>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.