

# Fiction Fights the Civil War

BY BERNARD DEVOTO

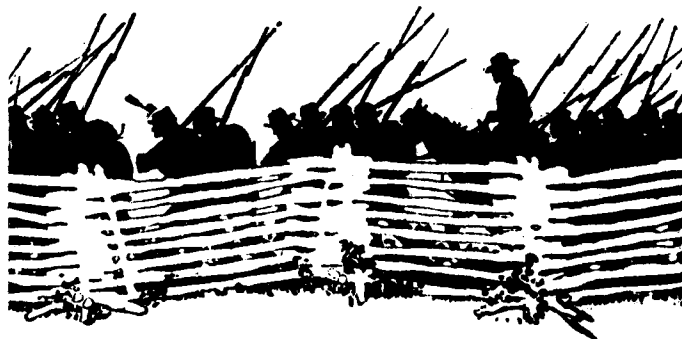
AT A TIME when the sales of one novel alone read like a statistician's effort to state the national deficit in round numbers, everyone must be aware that the Civil War has become profitable material for fiction. Yet the fact that "Gone with the Wind" has sold as widely as Old Gold cigarettes is not of itself very important. Other novels have sold in astronomical figures in our own time, and in the seventy-two years since Appomattox other Civil War novels have sometimes approached the popularity of Miss Mitchell's. More important to the critic are other facts which the furore of the best seller has tended to obscure. "Gone with the Wind" is only one, and is far from the best one, of a number of recent novels based on the Civil War. There have been so many of them that we may regard them as a wave or a cycle. That is an important literary and social fact. More important is the fact that, taken in the round, they express a point of view toward the Civil War which, if not new, is at least new to literature. In any period, historical fiction tends to conform to the dominant modes and values of the period—though the historical novel has usually been conservative and conventional. The present cycle is the more interesting to criticism in that it occurs during a period predominantly realistic and seriously concerned with social values.

It would be interesting to speculate about the social meaning of fiction's current preoccupation with the Civil War. Surely it signifies, in one aspect, an increased self-consciousness about our past; surely, in another aspect, a deep desire to understand our present. The Civil War was the greatest strain that has ever been put on the structure of our national life. Taking it all in, everything that went into it and everything that came out of it, it was the most important event in the history of the United States.

Ever since it ended, it has been a recurrent occupation of our fiction. Our generation is examining it with the instruments most familiar to our hands, determined to wring from it whatever significance it contains for what we are and what we are to be. We shall not be too arbitrary if we call the present one the fourth cycle of Civil War novels, each

one of them composed of novels more or less alike in sentiments, values, and manner.

The first wave of Civil War fiction came before the form of the modern American novel was shaped by Howells, Henry James, and Mark Twain. The novels that compose it are pretty bad and mostly very dull, and they seem as antique now as the candle snuffers that hang by your fireplace. Mostly it was a Northern wave. Mostly it was phrased in moral terms, as if secession had something in common with drunkenness or falsifying tax re-



FROM THE JACKET OF JAMES BOYD'S "MARCHING ON"  
*"The war narrows to a few men splendidly realized."*

turns. Mostly it was conciliatory, issuing a stern reproof to the Confederacy but announcing that its sins are forgiven, every drop of blood drawn by the lash having been paid for by one drawn by the pen. There is not much battle in these novels; there are more love scenes. And all but universally they yield to the commonest weakness of historical fiction, a vulgar tendency to demonstrate that the great processes of history are important chiefly as they may be made a mechanism for a romantic love story. Nevertheless, the critic will grant them some virtue. They do assert something about the horror and waste of war, and they are very near the people, nearer than their immediate successors. If they are sentimental and superficial in thinking about war, why, so are most of the people who take part in one, so was their audience.

Twenty years later the censorious but forgiving North had been displaced by the glamorous Southland. We must except an occasional realistic or skeptical novel that was not stifled by the fumes of honey-suckle, but primarily this second cycle is that of the Lost Cause. This is a literature of dream restoring the vanished way of life. It involves not an emotional accord, but the compulsion of a dream, of a

frustrated dream, born after defeat, shaped by nostalgia and pathos, a neurotic compensation, and a sentimental indulgence. An aristocracy perishes and too late truth rises again while error dies among her worshippers, and manly hearts bleed and noble tears flow while violins play offstage or—in Thomas Nelson Page—on the stage. Were there, the exasperated reader wants to shout, only noble passions in this war? Was there no madness, no hysteria, no panic? . . . It seems not, and the Southern symbols carried the field. Northern writers came to reverence the romantic myth, and the Northern cause disappeared from fiction for a quarter of a century.

So far Civil War fiction has had only such elementary psychology as gets into oratory, and has had nothing which, today, we should call realism. Realistic psychological fiction arrived in 1895 in an isolated masterpiece which was to have little literary influence for another generation. Stephen Crane's "Red Badge of Courage" shows vividly how critical categories fail and how complex are the problems we are dealing with. Surely it is a historical novel for, published in 1895, it is set in the battle of Chancellorsville. But neither the processes nor the events of history have any part in it, and Chancellorsville might as easily have been any battle in any war. For "The Red Badge of Courage" is a portrayal of an individual in battle—what he felt, what he thought, what he did—and it is nothing more. Its theme is a man in battle, as another novel's theme might be a man in marriage or in business or in the church. We cannot properly call it a Civil War novel. But it established a way of writing about battle that in our own time has had a decisive influence. Whenever, in fiction of the last ten years, a Civil War battle crosses the story's path you may see Stephen Crane's seal on it. In making the individual the conscious, sentient focus

Next  Week

FADE OUT

By NAOMI JACOB

Reviewed by Theodore Purdy, Jr.

TO A YOUNG WRETCH: A POEM

By ROBERT FROST

of battle scenes he did a great service to our fiction. We might well raise the question whether he did not also do it a disservice in leading fiction to ignore the battle experience, the battle emotions, of men in groups.

Let us now leap from 1895 to 1911. We must skip a minor resurgence of Civil War fiction, including Winston Churchill's "The Crisis," which, in 1901, had a popularity comparable to that of "Gone with the Wind" today. We can better examine the novels of today against the background of work far better than "The Crisis" but quite as obsolete.

Mary Johnston's "The Long Roll" and "Cease Firing," though published a year apart, are really one novel, and it should be noted that they add up to about three hundred pages more than "Gone with the Wind." They were a new kind of Civil War fiction. "The Crisis" had been a comprehensive novel in that it touched many of the dramatic crises of the war, the hero having a knack of turning up everywhere from ex-Captain Grant's woodyard and ex-Captain Sherman's promenades in 1860 to Ford's Theater on Good Friday, 1865. But Miss Johnston produced a genuine panorama of the war. Her two novels which, as I say, are one, are devoted to the Stonewall Brigade, the first from the secession of Virginia to Jackson's death at Chancellorsville, the second from the invasion of Pennsylvania to Appomattox, or rather the road to Appomattox, since she could not bring herself to picture the surrender. With the exception of the first two years in the West (where, you will remember, the defeat of the Confederacy began) and the trans-Mississippi campaign of 1864, the book gives a comprehensive and pretty detailed military history of the war. By detaching various characters from the Stonewall Brigade, she manages to give us New Orleans, Mobile, the *Monitor* and *Merrimac*, Port Gibson and Vicksburg, a northern prison, Chickamauga and Chattanooga, the march to Atlanta and part of the March to the Sea, as well as the complete campaigns of the Army of Northern Virginia. As military history it is accurate and frequently minute. The intent and emphasis of the book are always focused on the campaigns, but there is also a vigorous effort to characterize the civilian Confederacy as well.

This is surely an ambitious work, but it nevertheless seems to us now an ambitious failure. The reasons why it seems a failure reveal important principles of historical fiction. For one thing, the effort is too ambitious: no single book can contain the whole Confederacy. For another, though Miss Johnston was a flame of patriotic sentiment, she was not a good novelist, and it is far better, in historical novels, to be expert than to be impassioned. But most of all, she shows the

weakness which is so common in historical fiction that it may be called the occupational risk. Realistic in details, she is victimized by a lush Southern romanticism which dominates her understanding and portrayal of character.

Note that this is not said in objection to her special pleading for the South. In novels presenting the Southern cause one expects Southern sentiments, Southern passions and prejudices, a pattern and organization of feeling conditioned by the experience and the phantasies of the South. But one grows tired of the romantic conception of war and its inevitable result, the glorification of battle. Yet that is the least important objection to Miss Johnston's novel. A graver flaw is her unquestioning acceptance of the Lost Cause myth, the perfect society dominated by an aristocracy of noble souls and supported by a yeomanry of docile and satisfied souls. Surely, one thinks, surely the South at war was something more than some oratorical demigods sweating nobility in high office, a universal officer caste of Jeb Stuarts with plumes waving in the camera lens, and some tableaux of heroic maidenhood ever loyal and as inviolable as the battle flags of the First Virginia Cavalry. Surely war has its degradation and disintegration. Surely a nation is also people.

These objections sum up to a requirement that historical fiction use the instruments which other kinds of fiction have developed. Specifically they ask the historical novel to be realistic, to be psychologically valid, and to be socially aware. And that is the kind of novel that the present cycle has produced.

The larger part of this new cycle is devoted to the Confederacy. It is an interesting social comment that the Yankee novels, fewest in number, are most off-hand and realistic about the war. Thus Mr. McKinlay Kantor uses the war primarily as a setting and mechanism for individual experience. The central figures

of "Long Remember" are noncombatants, and the hero is even a conscientious objector. Its theme is the effect on passionate experience of nearness to and presence in a great battle. It is a study of individual psychology affected by a single aspect of war. Mr. Kantor's "Arouse and Beware" is still more indifferent to battles and the literary tradition of war. War provides the mechanism, the escape from a prison and the violence through which the narrative moves, but again the essence of the novel is the experience of three individuals confronting emergencies in a desperate effort to save their lives. Mr. Kantor is using the historical material as he would use contemporary material in a novel of contemporary life. His passionate lovers might be similarly endangered by an epidemic in 1937, or his three fleeing people might face menace and failure in the unemployment and panic of a few years ago.

This sort of thing means a considerable change in the novel. It is not only realism in war, it is realism about war. Mr. Kantor's soldiers and noncombatants are people as we meet them in realistic novels. They have head colds, hernias, personal animosities; they experience fatigue and their wounds get infected. They enjoy war, they hate war, they are bored by war, they endure war; they do not dramatize it and utter apostrophes about it. Such a casual novel as Royce Brier's "Boy in Blue" shows by its very assumptions the extent of the change. It is the career in war of an Ohio farm boy—before enlistment, as a recruit, in camp, on garrison duty, on furlough, in battle, in hospital, back at home. Much of its emphasis is laid on the hatred that grows up behind the lines, and we are shown the godly and intolerant folk who help to produce war, the development of mass hysteria and mob violence, professional veterans buying votes with their scars, and many other ugly accompaniments of

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FROM THE JACKET OF "BUGLES BLOW NO MORE," BY CLIFFORD DOWDEY



# Mime's Mirror

FIRST PERSON PLURAL. By Angna Enters. New York: Stackpole Sons. 1937. \$4.

Reviewed by JENNY BALLOU

WHEN Anita Enters resolved to become Angna Enters, she received little encouragement from her theater colleagues—if she may be said to have any. What made her believe that simply by sitting high with a rose in her palms, by walking up and down, by taking a step or two in a certain costume; or by plucking an instrument, or by a far-away tinkle of finger cymbals, she could hold an audience all by herself for a full evening? How did she know in her mime *La Jeune Fille de la Renaissance* that a girl in the fifteenth century held her head like that; or in *Promenade* that a young woman walking in the park during the Impressionist period would move that way? What certificate had she to offer of the emotion and manner of her *Boy Cardinal*? Perhaps the authoritarians secretly looked up “mime” in the dictionary, only to find: “A mimic play or farce; a dramatic representation akin to comedy; travestying real persons or events; a favorite pastime among the Greeks and Romans.” Somehow that did not explain Angna Enters. As to “composition in movement” or “dance form,” Miss Enters herself had not yet coined these random definitions of the undefinable, when a literal colleague called her on the telephone, after a performance, to inform her she was sorry but that wasn’t dancing.

But the telephone call was wasted. Miss Enters did not bother explaining herself; she had borrowed a reluctant twenty-five dollars, skipped all the usual intermediaries of a career, and gone straight before those who give the final verdict: her public. They did not have to peer into dictionaries, perplex themselves over forgotten Greek history, or worry about whether this was revival or prophecy. They enjoyed themselves. And Miss Enters, with pride, records as one of her first and lasting triumphs that a baseball reporter sent by the *New York Evening World* recommended her show as “all right.”

Knowing this theater to be all right, we may now learn the origin of the images that have held and moved us. With a born dancer’s equilibrium Miss Enters has balanced the personal with the abstract, the subjective with the essential. It is straight stuff, right from the lap of experience. “And so if my theme didn’t require me to dance, I didn’t; and if it called upon me to dance a few steps, play an instrument, I did.” Miss Enters has applied this same idea in her writing; when it suits the form of her impersonal personal history to use diary notes of studies in painting and

history made as a Guggenheim Fellow during her travels, she does not hesitate. We learn that what has enchanted us in her mosaics has been tested in historical laboratories; that there is not a pause or gesture that has not been doubly timed. Of her lighter mimes, one may say, as Nietzsche said of the Greeks, that they are superficial from profoundness. And now the authoritarians may relent and enjoy, even while the true origin of this art was in the mirror.

For it was painting that drew Miss Enters to mime, and it was her mime that in turn brought fresh vision to her painting. “Working directly with myself as a medium instead of with brush on canvas



ANGNA ENTERS  
“Court of Love—Seventeenth Century.”

might solve a lack of approach—just as now the study of painting seems to help me in the study of form in movement.” In knowing how to look into the mirror, the mime reveals the face of our own time; and through this same act of abstract concentration is able, with a nuanced glance, to convey the essence of a past epoch.

In “First Person Plural” Angna Enters has crossed the footlights without breaking the spell. And she speaks not only as an artist in this autobiography of her mimes and herself, “but as a person about persons.” With her, theories came after experience, learning only confirmed dramatic instinct; “When I had my first

hunch for what became my personal theatre, I didn’t know I was working in an ancient tradition. . . . In my approaches I never have accepted as valid any of the laws handed down rigidly classifying and drawing boundary lines between the forms in the theatre arts.” In remaining true to her hunches, Miss Enters has struck a resonant note in American esthetics.

Jenny Ballou is the author of “Spanish Prelude.” See page 18 for biographical note on Angna Enters.

## The Case for China

I SPEAK FOR THE CHINESE. By Carl Crow. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1937. \$1.

Reviewed by DAVID H. POPPER

THOSE who recognize this little book for what it is will salute its author for his superb presentation of a case which, in less unqualified form, would be disputed by few individuals. For Mr. Crow, fresh from the triumph of his delightful “400 Million Customers,” has turned his attention to the Sino-Japanese conflict. He writes with authority. He has headed an advertising agency in Shanghai for a quarter of a century, was employed by the United States as a propagandist in China during the World War, and saw similar service some years later as director of an anti-communist campaign financed by foreign business men in Shanghai. Small wonder, then, that he wields a well informed and subtly persuasive pen.

For the most part “I Speak for the Chinese” is the apparent truth, presented with such a combination of emphasis and omission, such nuance of phrasing, that the reader’s latent conviction of Chinese innocence and Japanese guilt is immeasurably strengthened. To a sober student Chiang Kai-shek and the Chinese government would scarcely appear in so favorable a light, nor the Japanese in such unmitigated darkness. One wonders why Mr. Crow has nowhere reminded us that imperialism in China has not been exclusively a Japanese and German phenomenon. One wonders why the Chinese currency reform of 1935 is described without reference to the American silver purchase policy which made it necessary—a course which would involve untoward reflections on the conduct of the United States—although Japan is justly pilloried for its attempt to sabotage that reform.

Indeed, the attitude of the United States is mentioned only twice, but in both instances with obvious intent. In a discussion of the sequel to the Manchurian crisis reference is made to “that large part of the American public which is willing to see injustice committed in other parts of the world so long as America can enjoy a cowardly peace”; and in the present conflict the Japanese militarists are said