

slaves. But their outrage can't diminish the appeal of the ripping good yarn that *Gone With the Wind* undeniably is.

Ken Burns's documentary *The Civil War*, which initially aired in 1990, has done much to educate the public and renew interest in the war. Somberly narrated by historian David McCullough and accompanied by bittersweet fiddle music, it leaves viewers with an amber-tinged sense of the war's tragedy and inevitability (and it turned prominently featured novelist-cum-historian Shelby Foote, with his deep Southern drawl, into a celebrity before his death in 2005). But, as a history professor recently complained in *Slate*, "notions about the war's transcendent meaning forged in the sentimental fires of the film" make it difficult to talk about the conflict's "knotty and complex history of violence, racial conflict, and disunion."

Distortion of one kind or another is inevitable in any treatment of an event as profound and contentious as the Civil War. There's no such

thing as a truly definitive account—even the multivolume works by great historians such as Foote and Bruce Catton must omit much, and bear the marks and limitations of their authors' personalities. To avoid being held captive to any single vision, it's important to rely on a multitude of voices, calling to us from the past and speaking to us in the present. Our contributors point to works both well known and obscure, of varying sympathies and schools of thought, that, taken together, offer a powerful portrait of America during the most traumatic period in its history. I hope you enjoy reading and learning from these pieces as much as I did.

—Sarah L. Courteau

The images in this section were taken from "The Last Full Measure: Civil War Photographs from the Liljenquist Family Collection," an exhibition on display at the Library of Congress until August 13, 2011. Most of the people in these photographs remain unidentified.

My Road to the Civil War

By James M. McPherson

AS WE BEGIN MOVING THROUGH THE SESQUICENTENNIAL commemoration of the American Civil War, my mind returns to the time more than a half-century ago when I decided to become a historian of the Civil War era. Unlike many of my friends and colleagues, I did not have a youthful fascination with the war. When I arrived at Baltimore in 1958 for graduate study at Johns Hopkins University, I had not read anything specifically on the subject, apart from a couple of books by Bruce Catton. I had not taken a college course on the Civil War because my college did not offer such a course.

I had a vague and rather naive interest in the history of the South, in part because, having been born in North Dakota and brought up in Minnesota, I found the South exotic and mysterious.

My senior year in high school, nine black students integrated Little Rock Central High School under the protection of the U.S. Army. I was well enough acquainted with history and current events to know that the constitutional basis for the black students' presence at Central High was the Fourteenth Amendment, one of the most important products of the Civil War. In retrospect, it seems apparent that this awareness planted the seed of my professional interest.

That seed germinated within days of my arrival at Johns Hopkins when, like other incoming graduate students, I met with a prospective adviser. Mine was C. Vann Woodward, the foremost historian of



Union soldier wearing 4th Infantry kepi hat

the American South, whose book *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1955) became almost the bible of the civil rights movement. My appointment was postponed for a day because Vann had been called to Washington to testify before a congressional committee about potential problems in Little Rock as a second year of school desegregation got under way. Here was a revelation: a historian offering counsel on the most important domestic issue of the day. If I had not seen the connection between the Civil War and my own times before, I certainly discovered it then.

That consciousness grew during my four years in Baltimore. The last two of those years were also the opening phase of the commemoration of the Civil War centennial. But that made little impression on me except for the initial events in Charleston, South Carolina, in April 1961 when a black delegate from New Jersey's centennial commission was denied a room at the Francis Marion Hotel. In protest, several Northern delegations walked out of

the events, boycotting them until President John F. Kennedy offered the integrated facilities at the Charleston Naval Base. This offer provoked the Southern delegations to secede from the national commission and hold their own events at the hotel. It all seemed like *déjà vu*.

Apart from this incident, the civil rights movement eclipsed the centennial observations. These were the years of sit-ins and freedom rides in the South, of massive resistance to national laws and court decisions by Southern political leaders, of federal marshals and troops trying to protect civil rights demonstrators, of conflict and violence, of the March on Washington in August 1963, when Martin Luther King Jr. stood before the

Lincoln Memorial and launched his "I have a dream" speech with the words, "Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been scarred in the flame of withering injustice."

It was these parallels between the 1960s and the 1860s, and the roots of events in my own time in events of exactly a century earlier, that propelled me to become a historian of the Civil War and Reconstruction. I wrote my doctoral dissertation—which in 1964 became my first book, *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction*—on the civil rights activists of the 1860s, the abolitionists who followed through after the demise of slavery by working for civil and political rights and education for freed slaves. After writing three books on these subjects, I grew more and more interested in the political and

military events of the antebellum, war, and reconstruction years that provided the context for the themes that had formed the focus of my early work.

In recent decades, my writings have dealt with broader developments in the political and military history of the era. As Abraham Lincoln expressed it

in his second inaugural address, after almost four years of war, “all else chiefly depends” on “the progress of our arms.” That “all else” included the abolition of slavery and the reconstruction of the Union on the basis

of the “new birth of freedom” Lincoln had invoked at Gettysburg—the issues that had engaged my interest in the Civil War in the first place.

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That war was the most profound and traumatic event experienced by any generation of Americans. Two percent of the population lost their lives in the Civil War. If the same percentage of the population were to die in a war fought today, the number of American deaths would exceed six million. Such a huge loss of life has echoed down the generations since 1865. Of even greater significance, perhaps, the Civil War and Reconstruction did more to shape and reshape American institutions than anything else in our history, even the Revolution of 1776 that gave birth to the nation. That revolution left unresolved two questions that festered deep in the body politic for more than half a century: Could this radical experiment in republican government survive as one nation, indivisible; and could the United States, founded on a charter of freedom, continue to endure half-slave and half-free? Four score and seven years after the Declaration of Independence, Abraham Lincoln answered both questions: The United States must have a new birth of freedom to ensure that the nation would not perish from the earth.

While preserving the nation and abolishing slavery, the Civil War also radically altered the balance of power between the federal and state governments. Eleven of the first 12 amendments to the Constitution had contained a litany of limitations on the powers of the federal government. But the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments (1865, 1868, and 1870), which abolished slavery and mandated civil and political equality for freed slaves, set a precedent whereby six of the next seven amendments provided that Congress “shall have the power” to enforce them by appropriate legislation. However imperfectly Congress has sometimes exercised these powers, especially in the case of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, the Constitution that emerged from the Civil War vastly strengthened the nation at the expense of the states.

Many of the issues over which the Civil War was fought still resonate today: matters of race and citizenship; regional rivalries; the relative powers and responsibilities of federal, state, and local governments. Controversies over the symbolism of the Confederate battle flag continue to arouse passions among Southern whites, many of whom consider it a symbol of a proud heritage, and among blacks and white liberals, for whom it has become a symbol of slavery and white supremacy. The centrality of slavery in the causes of secession and war generates sometimes angry debates between the die-hard minority of Southern historians who wish to deny that centrality and the mainstream who insist on it.

Because writing and teaching history is a dialogue between the present and the past, a historian who writes about the abolition of slavery and the enactment of civil rights legislation and constitutional amendments by the victorious North is also, implicitly and sometimes explicitly, entering into the current debate about these issues. The use of federal power to bring about radical social and political change in the 1860s carries important

implications for the use of federal power to bring about change in matters of race, citizenship, and social welfare today. So long as this remains true—and there is no sign that these issues will go away anytime soon—the Civil War will remain, as historian Shelby Foote

once described it, “the crossroads of our being.”

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What Like a Bullet Can Undeceive!

By Brenda Wineapple

“HOW SLOWLY OUR LITERATURE GROWS UP!” Nathaniel Hawthorne groused in 1845, never imagining that soon a bloody conflagration would catapult the country’s literature out of a protracted adolescence. Gertrude Stein, writing almost a hundred years later, saw the Civil War as having pushed the fledgling nation smack into the 20th century, thereby making the United States the “oldest country in the world.”

Stein’s perspicacious hyperbole aside, the great writing that came out of the Civil War had its roots in the period just before it, a period of violence, dissent, discomfiture, and fear. As early as 1845, Frederick Douglass was proving Hawthorne right; *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* was a book very much about the difficulty—and necessity—of growing up in a country that kept an entire people ignorant, childlike, subjugated. Then the pacifist Quaker poet John Greenleaf Whittier, in one of his best and tightest lyrics, “Icha-bod,” decried Massachusetts senator Daniel Webster’s treacherous support of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law. It was as if an era of presumed integrity had ended,

which perhaps it had; certainly, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) was calling it into question. And her polemical bestseller appeared just as Herman Melville was cracking open the novel with a far-reaching, far-sighted story about whaling in which the main character drily asks, “Who ain’t a slave?”

Yet the war also goaded writers into a new,



Sisters Lucretia Electa and Louisa Ellen Crosssett, possibly millworkers