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Interview

A MOST INHUMAN TRAGEDY: ROY MORRIS, JR. EXPLORES WHITMAN'S WARTIME HOSPITAL WORK

Theriot, Katie L.

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Civil War Book Review (cwbr): One of your earlier works is on Ambrose Bierce and, now, The Better Angel addresses Walt Whitman's wartime hospital service. Do Civil War literary figures offer a particular attraction to you as a writer and historian?

Roy Morris (rm): Coming as I do from an English literature background, I was naturally drawn to the literary aspects of the War, particularly the way in which the War was perceived and recounted by those few writers of note who experienced it firsthand.

Not many writers participated in the War—or lived to tell about it, at any rate. There was Bierce, Whitman, Sidney Lanier, John W. DeForest, John Esten Cooke, and a few others even less well-known today. Mark Twain claimed to have enlisted for a few weeks in a Missouri guerrilla outfit before "lighting out" for the West, but no one takes that claim very seriously today.

The best writers of the Civil War generation—Twain, Henry James, William Dean Howells, and Henry Adams—all managed to sit out the War in relative comfort and safety, and from the standpoint of American literature that was probably a good thing. But it's hard not to hold it against them a little bit, particularly when some other very talented writers—Fitz-James O'Brien, Theodore Winthrop, and William H. Lytle, to name a few—all died fighting for the Union, and Sidney Lanier had his life cut short by tuberculosis contracted in a northern prison camp. Who knows how many other potentially great writers—or teachers, doctors, scientists, ministers, or politicians—died in the War before they were old enough to make their mark on the world?

cwbr: The Better Angel recounts how Whitman was criticized both during and after the War for fulfilling his civic duty by visiting the sick rather than enlisting. Was Whitman a pacifist or a coward?

rm: Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a literary critic who had commanded a black regiment during the War, was the chief critic of Whitman's hospital service, partly because Higginson was Emily Dickinson's personal editor and resented Whitman's higher profile and greater artistic impact. But anyone who spent even a few hours in one of those Civil War hospitals—much less over two years, as Whitman did—immediately realized that they were more dangerous than any battlefield. The rampant fevers, infections, and communicable diseases killed soldiers three times as often as bullet wounds or cannonballs. You were literally taking your life into your hands to walk into those hospitals.

Whitman was certainly no coward, although he freely admitted that he could never imagine himself pulling a pistol or drawing a sword on anyone. He simply found another way to serve the Union, which he devoutly loved, and he paid for his service by contracting a serious hospital fever himself, which led directly to a cataclysmic stroke he suffered a few years after the War was over.

cwbr: Your book vividly describes Whitman's intense emotional connection with wounded soldiers. Was his decision to serve as a nurse influenced by his sexuality?

rm: Whitman was almost certainly a homosexual, and he did develop "crushes" on a few of the soldiers he met at the hospitals, but that was never the main reason he started making his hospital visits. He simply saw that he could help make a difference, however slight, in the lives of the young soldiers who were suffering and dying far from home, without anyone around to comfort them. As I say in *The Better Angel*, Whitman didn't go to the hospitals to make romantic conquests, he went to help. And he did.

cwbr: The Better Angel brings to light Whitman's extreme depression at the outbreak of the Civil War. Did the War provide Whitman with a greater sense of purpose?

rm: Whitman always said that the Civil War saved his life, which seems like a curious thing to say unless you know something about Whitman's life before the War. He had been going downhill—personally and professionally—for

several years before the War started. He was hanging around with a lot of New York bohemians, drinking too much and writing too little, and his book, *Leaves of Grass*, wasn't selling many copies.

His family life was miserable: one of his brothers was retarded, one was dying of syphilis, another was dying of tuberculosis, his mother was a serious hypochondriac—there was always some type of melodrama going on in the household. Then, too, he was still recovering from a broken heart—he had recently split up with a longtime lover—so when the combat began he was ready for a change.

cwbr: The hostilities also seem to have evoked a nationalist spirit in him.

rm: That's true. The War gave Whitman a chance to break the vicious cycle he was in by giving him something greater than himself to worry about. He had always been tremendously patriotic, and he saw the Union as an almost mystical entity that had to be preserved at all costs. The main message of *Leaves of Grass* was freedom—personal, political, sexual, artistic—and Whitman truly believed that the American Union was, as his hero Abraham Lincoln said, "the last best hope of earth."

After the War was over, Whitman never fell into a deep depression again, even after he suffered a series of strokes that left him more or less bedridden for the last two decades of his life. I think he felt that he had fought the good fight, so to speak. He never complained about what it had cost him—physically, mentally, and emotionally. "I only gave myself," he said. "I got the boys, I got the *Leaves*."

cwbr: Stephen Crane and other writers in the generation after Whitman reached back to the War for literary inspiration. Was their rendering of the War different from those such as Whitman and Bierce who observed it firsthand?

rm: Stephen Crane is one of my personal heroes, a true literary genius in the deepest sense of the word, but he was primarily interested in the Civil War—and war in general—as a symbol of man's fate in the modern world. As many critics have pointed out, *The Red Badge of Courage* could be about any war—there's very little real Civil War in it. It's more a brilliant psychological study than a work of historical fiction.

Crane took a more ironic view of the Civil War than Whitman, which was easier for him to do, since he hadn't been around at the time to personally watch young men die by the dozens, as Whitman had. Consequently, Whitman had a more tragic view of the War, which is reflected in his postwar poems, where he adopts a simpler, more direct style of writing to depict the War and its aftermath in a way that his young soldier friends would have immediately understood.

Ambrose Bierce, who called Stephen Crane a "freak," was a world-class cynic, but he was never cynical about the Civil War itself, only about the politicians who twisted it around afterwards for their own selfish use. Since Bierce didn't expect much of the world, anyway, he wasn't disillusioned by the Civil War. I think it pretty much confirmed what he thought about life in general: that it was dangerous, capricious, and unfair.

***cwbr:** Has your own understanding of the War changed after researching Whitman's response to it?*

rm:Being a Southerner, I grew up with a sense of the Civil War as a noble, tragic affair—the whole Lost Cause romanticizing. But the more I've studied the War, as an author and magazine editor, the more I've grown to hate it. It seems to me that it was a totally unnecessary waste of human life, with some of the finest young men America had to offer being the first to fall. When Whitman writes about "the dead, the dead, the dead, our dead," I think I know what he means.

If I could do nothing else, it would be to remove the whole notion of the Civil War as a romantic, colorful adventure. It was a terrible, and terribly sad, chapter in our national life, and I don't think anything that came out of the War—not even the abolition of slavery, which was dying out anyway—was worth the cost. The great thing about Whitman is that he makes us understand that cost individually, one soldier at a time. He puts a human face on a most inhuman tragedy.

Katie L. Theriot, a former editorial assistant at Civil War Book Review, works as a copyeditor in Manhattan.