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Feature Essay

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Melville, Herman *REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS: Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War: Civil War Poems*. Prometheus Books, \$13.00 ISBN 1573928933

A verse to the American Iliad

In the very first weeks of the Civil War, poets started firing off poems, and the war has kept marching in millions of metric feet ever since. Most misfire. It is a scandal and a shame that so little great poetry came out of the Civil War. Although he wrote some of the finest Civil War poems (*Civil War Poetry and Prose*, Dover, ISBN 0486285073, \$1.00 softcover), Walt Whitman himself said the war would remain unwritten. One wonders what the author of "The Wound-Dresser," "Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night," and "Cavalry Crossing a Ford" thought of the war poems of his contemporaries, Whittier, Emerson, Lanier, Longfellow, Lowell, and especially of Melville's **Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War**, published the year after the war ended.

Let us not pretend that Civil War poetry appeals to more than a minority of people who take a great interest in the war these days. But one should insist that the possibilities are worth exploring. And **Battle-Pieces** is a good place to start. You can take Civil War novelist-poet Robert Penn Warren's word for it (see his informed praise in the introduction to *Selected Poems of Herman Melville: A Reader's Edition*, Random House, 1970). The following poems may lure you into 80 others: "The March into Virginia," "Sheridan at Cedar Creek," "A Dirge for McPherson," "Malvern Hill," "Shiloh, A Requiem," "Ball's Bluff," "The Martyr," "The Conflict of Convictions." Titles tell. So do memorable lines: "In Bacchic glee they file toward Fate," "The ghost is yielded in the gloom," "the electric hoof spark flew," "the haggard beards of blood."

Civil War poetry since Melville has been mediocre at best, except for Vachel Lindsay's "Abraham Lincoln Walks at Midnight," Carl Sandburg's "Cool Tombs," Donald Davidson's "Lee in the Mountains," Allen Tate's "Ode to the

Confederate Dead," Robert Lowell's "For the Union Dead," and occasional poems by James Dickey, Robert Frost, John Berryman, Derek Walcott, Langston Hughes, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Randall Jarrell, John Updike, and, of course, Penn Warren. All those and hundreds more, well-chosen, you will find in *The Columbia Book of Civil War Poetry*, compiled, with a brilliant selection of photographs, by the late Richard Marius, a Civil War novelist (Columbia University Press, ISBN 0231100027, \$31.95 hardcover), which conscience dictates should be available also in softcover.

First published by Harper and Brothers, **Battle-Pieces** has been reissued in 1963, 1972, and 1995. This newest edition includes interpretive essays by literary and political scholars Helen Vendler, Richard H. Cox, and Paul M. Dowling, and by poet Rosanna Warren. Included also is a brief bibliography. You may prefer the facsimile edition, with its short introduction by Lee Rust Brown (Da Capo, ISBN 030680655X, \$16.00 softcover).

America deserves an epic poem on the Civil War by a poet of much greater genius than Stephen Vincent Benet, whose 1928 Pulitzer Prize-winning *John Brown's Body* (Ivan R. Dee, ISBN 092958726X, \$14.95 softcover) has stood as a modest monolith. Now and then, an unpublished poet asks my advice about submitting an epic poem to a publisher. White Mane will publish a brilliantly conceived full-length poem by Lee Passarella called "Swallowed Up in Victory," about the Siege of Petersburg. Andrew Hudgins's sequence of Civil War poems, *After the Lost War* (Houghton Mifflin, ISBN 0395457130, \$13.00 softcover) is very fine, but although we often speak of our Civil War as an American Iliad, no major poet has been lured by that phrase into taking on the challenge. Not even, despite his piece-meal effort, the author of that maritime epic Moby-Dick.

Founding director of the United States Civil War Center, David Madden has published poetry, nine novels including Cassandra Singing (reissued 1999), two collections of stories, and over 30 works of nonfiction, including Classics of Civil War Fiction, co-edited with Peggy Bach and reissued this spring. He has just finished a major revision of his 1974 novel Bijou and is currently at work on London Bridge Is Falling Down.