

# Civil War Book Review

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## Crofton's Fire

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## Review

Dyja, Thomas

Spring 2004

**Coplin, Keith** *Crofton's Fire*. G.P. Putnam's Sons, \$21.95 ISBN 399151125

Shell shocked:

A 19th century man's disillusionment with warfare

The copy line on Keith Coplin's **Crofton's Fire** reads, If Elmore Leonard had written *Little Big Man* or Kurt Vonnegut *Lonesome Dove*, the result might have been something like Crofton's Fire.

Having read the book in question, I can't quarrel with those possibilities, but I can question whether you'd actually want to read what they'd have come up with. It is humanly possible and sadly not against the law to add Amaretto to a martini, but who would want to drink it?

Our story, in brief, is as follows. Young Lieutenant Crofton witnesses from afar the killing of the much-hated Custer at Little Big Horn by his own troops; a last act of vengeance before they're all sacrificed to Manifest Destiny. Thus begins our hero's disillusionment. While trying to settle a local conflict over a French prostitute-cum-Helen of Troy, he is shot by said prostitute who turns out to be nothing more than a young girl, causing his grasping and overly-proper affianced to break off their engagement. The prostitute escapes. Upon recovery from both injuries, Crofton is drawn into an encounter with the Klan that he handles with expeditious and righteous violence and then returns to the fort to find the young (but apparently not too young) prostitute, named Louise, in the care of one of his officers. Wondrously, the bullet had been a Cupid's arrow and the two marry. Off to Washington D.C. with the couple, where Crofton finds himself stationed as a proto-secret agent. He is sent to Cuba to run guns and assassinate a rebel leader, a mission that does not end well and further dents our hero's faith in the American Ideal. Then he's off to Africa on a friendly junket to both advise and spy on the English as they try to suppress the Zulus, a trip which allows Crofton to fight in yet another harrowing battle of dubious morality, with

much slaughtering by both sides for us to chew over. Safe and sound back in the States, father to a large brood produced by his prostitute-turned wife, he takes a position as an instructor at West Point and the ceremony at which he is to receive the Victoria Cross for his work in Zululand dissolves into a sectional riot between Tilden supporters and Hayes men that falls somewhere between the climax of *Casino Royale* and the Monty Python parody of *If*, though that makes it sound like more fun than it is.

The book reads very quickly and there's not a bad sentence to be found. It is well-intentioned, well-oiled and utterly bloodless; nouvelle cuisine served under the guise of a steak roast on the trail. Characters of great import to our hero are described with one line and we're left to conjure every other thing about them. Characters do funny things, say funny things, but draw at best world-weary smirks. Grant and Sherman and Longstreet wander across the stage yet leave no impression, are in no way anchored to either our world or the world of this book because nothing in it is anchored. Even as our hero comes to his blissful realization that killing people is bad and empire is a questionable pursuit, his wife is a laughable creation, a child whore turned Madonna whose reason to exist in the book is seemingly to produce children and reassuringly snuggle up to Crofton upon his return from each adventure. In trying so hard to be spare and manly and terse, all that is supposed to be manic and fun and absurd here is drained of energy and detail and interest and we are left with little more than stage direction.

**Crofton's Fire** is the sort of historical novel that aspires to something higher, some kind of deep commentary as to who we've been and who we ought to become. Before another word passes, it should be made clear that I am guilty of the same petty crime and plan on committing the same for as long as I can type, so I have no issue with viewing history through modern eyes. I do have a problem, though, with passing off Modernist style as modern consciousness. The glory of 19th century epic fiction and its richly imagined imitators such as MacDonald Fraser is that they take advantage of the depth and complexity of that time and, most importantly, that style to reveal the absurdities and complications of the huge moral issues posed by the rise of the Anglo-American empire in the last two centuries. By this time we well know that European empire building was something other than a heroic effort. In fact, we know it so well that most of us try to forget it. That's where the job of the novelist begins.

While I completely agree with just about every conclusion Crofton comes to (the absurdity of the Empire, Custer's awfulness, the immorality of the Scramble for Africa, the mistake of using military force as a strategy rather than a last resort) if you're going to be polemical, which must be the point since we don't laugh, cry or get angry at a single thing in this book, you have to do more than state the obvious. A novelist's job is to constantly pump new life into the obvious, to retell stories in new ways, to surprise the reader into truly realizing something that he already knows, or thinks he knows.

But **Crofton's Fire** is a watered down drink. For such a long journey of moral awakening as Lt. Crofton's, it is a really just a walk from point A to point B, the assumption of his rectitude only making him less and less real to us as he moves on. Its modernity is a Seventies sort of modernity, all about questioning authority and relying on the sheer wonder of the act of questioning to convince us of its importance.

And yet we're now in an age where questioning authority is all we do. Whatever discourse we're engaged in, the other side is the awful, all-powerful authority, be it the Bush Administration or the Liberal Media Conspiracy. We are all The Underdog now. The cult of Ayn Rand has made each of us smarter than everyone else, has let us believe that each of our own bundles of desires is the entire purpose of America's existence. When every man wages his own personal war against the machine, a machine which just happens to be made up of everybody else, it distracts us all from the real solutions, which tend to be (surprise!) as complex and epic as the historical circumstances that created the problems. Fiction must entertain, but it must also help us sort out the complexities and remember as we go forward that each human counts. Well-meant as it is, this book fails on all counts.

History is a vast sea that only gets wider and deeper each day. **Crofton's Fire**, for all its finely sanded edges and well-worked sentences, does little more than bounce off its surface.

*Thomas Dyja is author of Play for a Kingdom and Meet John Trow.*