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Feature Essay

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Arnold, Matthew, Twain, Mark, and Simon, John Y., Editor.
REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS: General Grant. Southern Illinois
University Press,

Warring egos

Laughter and applause indicated

To rattle our rusty sabers more lustily, perhaps we need to imagine what very unlikely people might have said about the Civil War. Take Matthew Arnold, famous English Victorian poet and critic, for instance. What might he have said about General Grant and his *Personal Memoirs*? And what might Mark Twain, Gilded Age humorist and Grant's publisher, have sassed back at Arnold?

The answer lies in this out-of-print little book of only 58 pages.

Some might ask, Aren't these contenders unequally yoked in this book? Hardly Grant, who said, I propose to move immediately upon your works! Hardly Arnold, who wrote, We are swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, /where ignorant armies clash by night. Hardly Twain, who declared, through Huck, All right, then, I'll go to hell!

Arnold's Dover Beach, is one of the most famous modern poems, as Grant's *Memoirs* is one of the most famous of Civil War, indeed American, memoirs, as Hemingway avowed. Had I been there, I would have seconded the motion; thousands of readers over the past century and more have gotten into the act. So when Arnold rapped Grant's knuckles with British rules of grammar, Twain became spokesman for American outrage. Imagine Twain writing a parody of Arnold's great poem.

So there they stand, the three of them, monumental egos clashing in a world of words.

Twain's rejoinder is a speech at the Annual Reunion of the Army and Navy Club of Connecticut, delivered April 27, 1887, published in the *Hartford Current*, reprinted in Boston and elsewhere. Having ignited laughter by his recital of Arnold's skirmish at Grant's grammar and having saluted Grant's *Memoirs* as a great, unique and unapproachable literary masterpiece, Twain instructed Arnold to pay attention to the fact that When we [Americans] think of General Grant our pulses quicken and his grammar vanishes. What do we care for grammar when we think of the man that put together that thunderous phrase, 'Unconditional and immediate surrender!' And those others: 'I propose to move immediately upon your works!' 'I propose to fight it out on this line if it takes all summer!' [Applause] By focusing almost solely on a minor point in Arnold's commentary, on the other hand, Twain distracted his audience and his readers from Arnold's bottom line: Grant is shown by this book to be one of the most solid men they [Americans] have had. I prefer him to Lincoln. He refers here not only to Grant the general, but to Grant in the aggressive act of writing, beating back the hour of death by throat cancer long enough to raise money to support the family he will leave behind, he and his son having lost all their money in a speculative venture. Simon's own judgment is that overall Arnold's essay is a graceful tribute. Mark Perry says Twain took as an insult what Arnold meant as a bass-ackward compliment (**Grant and Twain**, Random House, 2004). Let me go further: Twain's aim was more laughter and applause for Twain, than justice for Grant.

The authoritative introduction by the editor, John Y. Simon, Harvard man, director of the U. S. Grant Association, which he organized in 1962, with the mission of collecting and editing the writings of Grant, which Southern Illinois University Press started publishing in 1967, traces the meetings between Arnold and Grant and Arnold and Twain and the history of the publication of Arnold's analysis and Twain's speech in response.

Simon tells us that Grant's book was respected by Americans whether or not they had read it. and that Arnold's poetry and essays had been reprinted and widely read in the United States. As the most influential English literary critic of the day, he would speak with the voice of his nation. Arnold met Grant ten years before he wrote the essay. In 1877, Grant was guest of honor at a breakfast in London, other guests being Robert Browning, Anthony Trollope, Thomas Hughes, and Thomas Henry Huxley. In 1883, Grant attended a reception for Arnold in America. Then Grant attended Arnold's first American lecture a few

days later. Arnold, who would later take some quick elocution lessons in Boston, was unable to make himself heard, says Simon. Well, wife, we have paid to see the British lion; we cannot hear him roar so we had better go home.'

An occasional American, like Henry James, would find in Arnold a kindred spirit in the Victorian era, Simon says, and Americans today are much more likely to focus on what Arnold actually said in praise of Grant than on what he seemed to imply as adverse reflection on the habits of his countrymen, often in a tone of supercilious condescension. Arnold stopped reading Lincoln's Gettysburg Address at the Americanism of dedication to the proposition.' The *New York Tribune* concluded that the fastidious critic Arnold never seemed to us so small, so little worth while as when he ranged himself by the side of this strong and simple patriot-soldier.

Twain was both a personal friend of General Grant and the publisher of his best-selling *Memoirs*, Simon tells us. Furthermore, Arnold had singled out Twain for condemnation even before his visit to the United States. Told that William Dean Howells was visiting Mark Twain, Arnold was shocked that he would like Twain's folksy stuff. But when Arnold and Twain met, they so enjoyed each other's company that Arnold dined the following evening at Twain's home. While Arnold was walking home with another guest he asked: And is he never serious?' Mr. Arnold,' came the reply, he is the most serious man in the world.' Even so, Arnold failed to understand Twain; after the publication of the essay on Grant, Twain never tried to understand Arnold. Instead, Arnold became a pet prejudice.

Arnold notes that the *Personal Memoirs* had been received in England with coldness and indifference, selling less than 300 copies, and that Grant was not to the English imagination the hero of the American Civil War; the hero is Lee, and of Lee the Memoirs tell us little. He had seen Grant in England, and had not found him interesting. I thought him ordinary-looking, dull and silent. But he had read a published letter by Grant. It was the letter of a man with the virtue, rare everywhere, but more rare in America, perhaps, than everywhere else, the virtue of being able to confront and resist popular clamour. Insult-seekers found their opening in such examples, numerous in the essay, of Arnold's patting the General on the head, simultaneously slapping Americans in the face. They were then, but we need not be now, oblivious to the more numerous examples of unalloyed praise of the man and the *Memoirs*. I found shown in them a man, strong, resolute and business-like, as Grant appeared to me when I first saw him.

The rest of the sentence was intended as praise of a special, uniquely American trait: a man with no magical personality, touched by no divine light, and giving out none. Then he handed readers, especially Twain, the ammunition they sought against any Englishman raising his head above the rampart. I found a language all astrayàan English without charm and without high breeding. That said, he went on to sayùm mark you, Twainùn never boastful where he himself was concerned, and where his nation was concerned seldom boastful, boastful only in circumstances where nothing but high genius or high training, I suppose, can save an American from being boastful. I found a language straightforward, nervous, firm, possessing in general the high merit of saying clearly in the fewest possible words what had to be said, and saying it, frequently, with shrewd and unexpected turns of expression.

Of Grant's boyhood, Arnold exclaimed approvingly, What a wholesome bringing up it was!à Grant came in later life to see straight and to see clear, more than most men, more than even most Americansà. Under young Grant's plain exterior and air of indifference, there had grown in him an independent and sound judgment. Arnold quotes an example of that: The Southern rebellion was largely the outgrowth of the Mexican War. Nations, like individuals, are punished for their transgressions. We got our punishment in the most sanguinary and expensive war of modern times.

Then Arnold engaged in an analysis of Grant's complex pre-war politics that may serve as an example of the value of letting an Englishman have his say: Grant himself voted in 1856 for Buchanan, the candidate of the Slave States, because he saw clearly, he says, that in the exasperation of feeling at that time, the election of a Republican President meant the secession of all the Slave States, and the plunging of the country into a war of which no man could foretell the issue. He hoped that in the course of the next four years --the Slave States having got a president of their own choice, and being without a pretext for secession--men's passions would quiet down, and the catastrophe be averted. Even if it was not, he thought the country would by that time be better prepared to receive the shock and resist it.

I am not concerned to discuss Grant's reasons for his vote, but I wish to remark how completely his reflexions dispose of the reproaches addressed so often by Americans to England for not sympathizing with the North attacking slavery, in a war with the South upholding it. Arnold admired Grant's always on-target perspective: from the time he started until he received Lee's surrender

at Appomattox Court House, four years later, he was always the same strong man, showing the same valuable qualities.

As if to prove his claims for him, Arnold shows Grant is as good as home folks. He certainly had a good deal of the character and the qualities which we so justly respect in the Duke of Wellington. Wholly free from show, parade, and pomposity; sensible and sagacious; scanning closely the situation, seeing things as they actually were, then making up his mind as to the right thing to be done under the circumstances, and doing it; never flurried, never vacillating, but also not stubborn, able to reconsider and change his plans, a man of resource; when, however, he had really fixed on the best course to take, the right nail to drive, resolutely and tenaciously persevering, driving the nail hard home--Grant was all this, and surely in all this he resembles the Duke of Wellington. Surely the Duke of Wellington would have read these *Memoirs* with pleasure.

Grant operated on discoveries, derived from direct experience, of common denominators among armies. I never forgot that an enemy had as much reason to fear my forces as I had his. The lesson was valuable. Arnold opens Part II with this statement: It was Grant's conviction that there was nothing left to be done but *to go forward to a decisive victory*, learning from defeat as he went. Losses at Holly Springs taught Grant a lesson by which he, and Sherman after him, profited greatly: the lesson that in a wide and productive country, such as that in which he was operating, to cling to a distant base of supply was not necessary; the country he was in would afford the supplies needed.

If, under fire, Grant was the personification of brute, even callous, force, he showed grace in peace. I felt like anything rather than rejoicing at the downfall of a foe who had fought so long and valiantly, and had suffered so much for a cause, though that cause was, I believe, one of the worst for which a people ever fought. I had not attracted his [Lee's] attention sufficiently to be remembered by him after such a long interval.

We can be sure that Arnold's schoolmarmish, Victorian epigramizing made Twain wince. It is men who wait to be selected, and not those who seek, from whom we may always expect the most efficient service. But Twain and Americans generally seemed unable to benefit from passages laced with criticism and praise in equal measure. Modest for himself, Grant is boastful, as Americans are apt to be, for his nation. He is fond of adding, in what I must call the American vein, *better than any European soldiers.* And the reason assigned

for this boast is in the American vein too: Because they not only worked like a machine, but the machine thought. European armies know very little what they are fighting for, and care less.' Europeans might have listened more closely to Grant (perhaps they do now, given the usefulness of his tactics in the kinds of battles being fought around the world in our time). Arnold continues, Why cannot the Americans, in speaking of their nation, take Sainte-Beuve's happy and wise caution? The point is worth insisting on, because to be always seeking to institute comparisons, and comparisons to the advantage of their own country, is with so many Americans a *tic*, a mania, which every one notices in them, and which sometimes drives their friends half to despair. Americans in the rage for comparison-making beat the world. That trait is not only absurd, it is retarding.

Having admitted that his opinion on any military subject is of course worth very little, Arnold settles into his favorite chair by the fireplace and proceeds to assert that in what Napier calls strength and majesty' as a fighter, the American soldier, if we are to institute these comparisons, had his superiors; though as brave as any one, he is too ingenious, too mental, to be the perfection of the fighting animal. Where the Yankee soldier has an unrivalled advantage is in his versatility and ingenuity; dexterous, willing, suggestive, he can turn his hand to anything, and is of twenty trades at the same time with that of the soldier. Grant's Memoirs are full of proofs of this faculty. The resource and rapidity shown by the troops in the repair of railroads wrecked by the enemy were marvelous. In Sherman's Atlanta campaign, the Confederate cavalry lurking in the rear to burn bridges and obstruct his communications had become so disgusted at hearing trains go whistling by, within a few hours after a bridge had been burned, that they proposed to try blowing up some of the tunnels. One of them said on this: no use, boys; old Sherman carries duplicate tunnels with him, and will replace them as fast as you can blow them up; better save your powder!' A leader to use these capable and intelligent forces, to use all the vast resources of the North, was needed, a leader wise, cool, firm, bold, persevering, and at the same time, as Cardinal Mazarin says, *heureux*; and such a leader the United States found in General Grant. Instead of assurances that they are the greatest nation upon earth,' let them [Americans] give us more Lees, Lincolns, Shermans, and Grants. Arnold did not live to see the England-saving work of Eisenhower and Roosevelt, and today's Well, perhaps, he would settle, as many Americans do, for the young men and women serving in Iraq.

In Twain's Arnold-bashing speech as it appears in print, laughter and applause are indicated in brackets. If one may suppose that Arnold read Karl

Marx's reports to the Times on the American Civil War [see an earlier Rediscovery], one may easily imagine, throwing Marx into the mix, a Broadway play in which Twain, Arnold, and Marx interact with Grant as he, dying, bearly able to speak, listens (only off and on, one may imagine).

But first, let's exhort Professor Simon to seek a new edition of this oddity, this rarity, this timely perspective.

Founding Director of the United States Civil War Center and creator of The Civil War Book Review, David Madden is the author of several books on the Civil War, the latest being Thomas Wolfe's Civil War; forthcoming is his edition, with introduction, of Losses of the Sultana and Reminiscences of the Survivors; also in preparation is O. Henry's Civil War Surprises. He is Donald and Velvia Professor of Creative Writing at LSU. His novel in progress, London Bridge Is Falling Down, is still rising.