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Interview

THOMAS WOLFE'S CIVIL WAR

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Interview with David Madden

Interviewed by John Idol

Guest interviewer John Idol lives in Hillsborough, NC, after having retired from teaching at Clemson University for thirty-one years. The author of two books and many articles on Thomas Wolfe, he served a term as the president of the Thomas Wolfe Society and edited or co-edited several Wolfe works, including Mannerhouse, The Party at Jack's, and Passage to England. He is the author of Blue Ridge Heritage, which opens with a chapter on his great grandfather, John Nicholson Idol, who served as a Confederate Sharpshooter in Company B, 1st Battalion North Carolina Sharpshooters.

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): From the standpoint of Wolfe's literary reputation, what are your aspirations for Thomas Wolfe's Civil War?

David Madden (DM): My selection of Wolfe's Civil War writings--stories, plays, excerpts from his novels--provides a fresh perspective on his work, attracting, I hope, new readers and reactivating the admiration and involvement of old readers. The fixed public image of Wolfe needs this new facet if Wolfe's work is to be discovered by the young and rediscovered by readers worldwide. Given the great interest in the American Civil War, as evidenced in part by the great number of visitors to the United States Civil War site and this online publication, I feel confident in this expectation. Receptivity to my claim that Wolfe was a Civil War writer and among the best--potentially, the very best--may derive from the fame of his short story Chickamauga.

It's difficult to know just how strong and pervasive Wolfe's reputation is these days, even though his novels are all in print--last time I checked--and several of his posthumous works continue to get published, and even though The

Thomas Wolfe Society is vigorous, and the Wolfe Memorial House and Museum in Asheville attracts a steady stream of visitors. Publication of all his plays in a single volume is being planned, by the way.

CWBR: In what ways did Wolfe's handling of the Civil War help to shape your own Civil War tale, Sharpshooter?

DM: Beyond saying that I cannot easily identify any Wolfe work or perspective that influenced me during the fifteen years I revised my novel--off and on, interrupted mainly by establishing and running the United States Civil War Center--that's very difficult to recapture. My novel is so different in conception and technique from any other Civil War fiction (I read a good many and gave them all to a special collection at LSU) that Wolfe's perspective would be included in that claim. After my novel was published, I re-read his Civil War writings and felt a deep affinity between his historical sensibility and my own, but identified no clear influences or even parallels.

Wait a second. Your question does, just now, help me--in the effort to answer--see a very complex and profound parallel, but odd, too. Willis Carr, a child warrior, spends his life trying to recapture not only his own actions in the war and sense of the war but that of others, obsessively gathering the facts but seeing how memory transforms them. Wolfe and his characters go through a similar process. In my long introduction, I think I may convey a sense of how Wolfe's memory reworked the raw material of his family and his nation's role in the war and how his art rendered that drama of consciousness. So, yes, there is that parallel, although I doubt anyone would pick up on it without my testimony here. But now it is on record, I hope folks will explore it.

CWBR: You say, in your introduction to Thomas Wolfe's Civil War, that his war writings will illuminate a first reading or a re-reading of everything else he wrote. Would you please offer an example?

DM: Not a specific example, perhaps, but a somewhat general one. Wolfe is known best, I think, for writing about the mountain people of North Carolina and about his own experiences in New York as a southern writer. There is less sustained awareness of passages from his novels and of his short stories set in London, Paris, Munich and other foreign places. My primary emphasis upon the Civil War in Wolfe's overall vision of America and of mankind may make those foreign ventures blend in with his vision.

I articulate that vision by claiming that all serious fiction by a Southerner (or more accurately in his case, a mountain person) is about the Civil War, in the sense that the times before, during, and after pervasively affected the Southern perception of and response to life in the South and elsewhere. By contrast, the effect on the Northern consciousness since Reconstruction is practically untraceable. My readers will carry over, I hope, to Wolfe and his autobiographical character as they experience Europe an acute awareness of how the Civil War has affected their perceptions of all facets of life, everywhere.

CWBR: *If Wolfe's first novel, Look Homeward, Angel, had been published as it was originally written (titled O Lost), his interest in the Civil War would have been known from the beginning of his career. What might Wolfe's standing in American letters be if the full version had been published by Scribners?***DM:** Everything I said in response to the previous question provides an answer to this one. But more directly, Wolfe's original beginning ultimately dramatizes the effect of the war on America itself, not just on the hero's father and thus on the hero himself and on the mother and thus on the son, and on all the people around the hero all during his formative years, and by contrast, on none of the people he meets beyond the mountains, but on America itself and, because of America's influence in the world, upon Europe. The novel ends with a vision of the past, focused upon his brother's ghost and the marble angel, and simultaneously with a vision of the future, all the experiences of which will be infused with the facts, memory, and consciousness of that Civil War-affected past. That frame would have, I imagine, taken the focus off the autobiographical character and enabled the reader to dwell upon Wolfe's complex vision, with a sense of the author's myriadmindedness.

CWBR: *In your prize-winning essay entitled Lost Men: From Gettysburg to Chickamauga you examine Wolfe's The Four Lost Men and Chickamauga. About the first of these, you praise Wolfe's imaginative presentation of the lost men. Are you building a case that Wolfe was not merely an autobiographical writer? About the second story, you assert that Chickamauga in its own way [is] unique in Civil War literature. Would you please expand upon that claim?*

DM: Your questions and my answers are so bound up with each other, as in a web, that I again have started an answer to this question if we keep in mind my answer to the previous one. The sooner we minimize the autobiographical element in Wolfe's work, the sooner we will see success in our effort to extend

his readership. Interest in that element was understandable in the first decade or so after publication of his work was complete, but it became a fixed star in the literary firmament. As contrast, I hope to see his work move like a meteor through our consciousness, showering us with all the elements Wolfe embraced. The I in his work was always reaching, even overreaching, beyond his navel as the center of the universe, as his first long work, the play *Mannerhouse* suggests. Wolfe's essentially omniscient sensibility is at work in that play, and if there is anything of himself in that play, in the hero, it is simply an expression of the artistic sensibility.

The perspective, style, and ultimate vision of *Four Lost Men* are the work of a uniquely omniscient creative mind and energy. Chickamauga is unique in its own way because the first person narrative also embraces more than his own experience to transmit to his listener a perspective on the whole of the war, using the particular, I have tried to make clear, only as access to the universal. No other short story, except perhaps Ambrose Bierce's *One of the Missing*, comes close to that achievement. Nor does any Civil War novel I know of, although I must say that was my own intent in *Sharpshooter*.

CWBR: *Wolfe's characters Old Sorrell in Welcome to Our City and Theodore Joyner in The Hills Beyond hurl satiric barbs at Southern veterans of the War Between the States. Do you see these two characters as Wolfe's ridicule of the Lost Cause?*

DM: Yes, but although there is much genuine humor and satire and too many lunges at humor and satire in Wolfe's fiction and drama, his was not in essence a satirical vision of life. He was a romantic, and like most romantics he was critical of everything that fails the test of the visionary ideal. Humor was natural to his folk environment and a compulsion to criticize the ills and stupidities of the world came out of the frustration of a romantic who sees year by year no real progress toward change. He attacked the Lost Cause because it confined the Civil War experience to notions set in motion before the war, fixed in place during the war, and irrationally unsundered after the war. In his myriadmindedness, everything was in constant dynamic motion, and nothing about anything was the absolute truth forever, especially something so multifaceted in fact, memory, and imagination as the Civil War.

The satire in *The Hills Beyond*, as opposed to *Welcome to Our City*, has an odor of elegiac sadness about it. He had been working on his great Civil War

Epic over so many years, distracted too often, that he dealt with the comic and satirical aspects more often as being, in my opinion, easier in this draft than what the more complex vision demanded.

CWBR: *Having spent many months helping to establish the full text of Wolfe's Mannerhouse, I'm eager to hear you develop your claim that your argument for the intensity of Wolfe's lifelong pre-occupation with the Civil War rests first of all and firmly upon Mannerhouse.*

DM: Well, I must say, you have some nerve asking me that question, your having been the person who persuaded me to get out on that limb. Like most people who are moved finally to read all of Wolfe's work, I must have skimmed through it as mindlessly as driving across Nebraska. Taking a close look, out of my conviction that Wolfe is a Civil War writer, I was astonished to see the young writer do in his first long work *Mannerhouse*, what I had been claiming for his last, projected long work (alas, unfinished) *The Hills Beyond*--take on the antebellum, war, and reconstruction eras with a high seriousness, mingled with Shakespearean comic interludes and a hero more like Hamlet than Eugene Gant.

In brief, everything I have said at length in this interview about Wolfe's Civil War preoccupation and achievement may be seen most clearly in that play, written before his fiction, and worked on further even after he'd written *Look Homeward, Angel*. I'm grateful to you, John.

CWBR: *In A Reed of Demonic Ecstasy you revealed, seriocomically, Thomas Wolfe's influence on you as an aspiring teenage writer. Were his writings on the Civil War, at that time, something that drew you to him?*

DM: Not that I can trace out. The Civil War, as I argue in my introduction to the book, is not an obvious force in Wolfe's work until you isolate it and contemplate it from the great congeries of other, but lesser elements, and as a kid who was somewhat ignorant of the Civil War, I did not do that. The movie *Gone with the Wind* was my source of Civil War history until I got to college (not listening in high school, where I wrote stories in every class). What drew me to Wolfe was the rhapsodic music of his style, played upon a reed of demonic ecstasy. The voice of God himself, actually. And some of what he said was as enigmatic to my adolescent mind as God's word. But in the beginning, it was, after, the words. Not to mention the end.

CWBR: *With emphatic conviction, you proclaim that the great American novel must also be the great Civil War novel. What factors, artistic and historical, underlie that belief?*

DM: I go over them in the introduction, and in several other writings, but they bear repeating.

First, it can only be by a Southerner, as I set out arguing in the introduction, for reasons given above regarding the claim that all fiction by a Southerner is infused with the effects of the Civil War. The northern novelist can deal only with facts and universal aspects of character, neither of which can alone convey a full and visionary sense of the war's effects. No other historical event in American history (or in European history affecting the American experiment and experience) comes close to the Civil War in its many faceted, *traceable*, impacts, influences, and overall and pervasive effects upon American land, character, and dream, upon the South mostly. Every major aspect of American history comes into play again in the Civil War and Reconstruction, which in turn has influenced events in our history thereafter. Our nightmare problems have reflected the war and its aftermath (race relations, economic instability, mistrust of government) and our bright prospects derive from it (the many wartime scientific inventions, the military tactics, the stability of our federal and even local government over time, the clarification of our identity and our mission as a nation).

The great American novel will directly (as being set before and during the war and Reconstruction) or indirectly (through context and implication) set the War at the heart of the American experience, and through a mastery of many of the techniques of art express the effects of the war upon the American experience. The omniscient point of view seems most effective technique for the master writer this task demands. And the style that derives from that point of view technique must be at least as brilliant as Wolfe's in *Four Lost Men*.

David Madden, Donald and Velvia Crumbley Professor of Creative Writing at LSU, is the author of Sharpshooter, a Civil War novel, and editor of several books on the War. He is founder of the United States Civil War Center and of the Civil War Book Review and co-editor of Classics of Civil War Fiction at the University of Alabama Press. He is nearing final construction of London Bridge Is Falling Down, his ninth novel.