

REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS:Democracy and Esther

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Recommended Citation

Madden, David (2005) "REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS:Democracy and Esther," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 7 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.7.3.3

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol7/iss3/3>

Feature Essay

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Summer 2005

Adams, Henry *REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS:Democracy and Esther*.

Classics, old and instant

Two Novels:

Democracy and Esther

By Henry Adams (pictured above left)

Two Stage Pieces:

Democracy: An American Comedy, an opera

By Scott Wheeler & Romulus Linney (libretto, pictured above right)

Democracy and Esther, a play

By Romulus Linney

I offer simultaneously a rediscovery, two novels by Henry Adams (*Democracy*, a best-seller, published anonymously in 1880, and *Esther*, a bad-seller, published under the pseudonym Francis Snow Compton in 1884) and an immediate discovery, Scott Wheeler's opera *Democracy: An American Comedy*, which is based on Linney's play adaptation of the Adams novels, and was premiered by the Washington National Opera on January 28th of this year.

In **Democracy**, Adams focuses upon Mrs. Lightfoot Lee, a philosophical socialite and philanthropist, who for reasons which many persons thought ridiculous decided to pass the winter in Washington. She is bent upon getting to the heart of the great American mystery of democracy and government. She becomes entangled with two very different men: Carrington, who had fought

bravely in the Civil War for a cause in which he never fully believed, and Senator Ratcliffe, a great statesman whose career is threatened by scandal.

Mrs. Lee thinks Carrington, who feels he was born before his time, is like George Washington at age 30. She is fascinated by Ratcliffe, a clever, Machiavellian Yankee who loves politics, the pleasures of which lay in the possession of power, and who aspires to express his love of it in the position of president. Had she not come to Washington in search of men who cast a shadow, and was not Ratcliffe's shadow strong enough to satisfy her? Had she not penetrated the deepest recesses of politics, and learned how easily the mere possession of power could convert the shadow of a hobby-horse existing only in the brain of a foolish country farmer, into a lurid nightmare that convulsed the sleep of nations? Good writing, that and all the rest of it, as in this passage: Was it politics that had caused this atrophy of the oral sense by disuse? Meanwhile, here she sat face to face with a moral lunatic. And both Romulus Linney's play and libretto adaptations soar at the same height, line by line.

Satire, sometimes of a rather low order, dominates the first part of the novel, but a shift occurs that culminates at last in a political fable of a high order. Carrington, haunted by memories of the war, and Mrs. Lee's younger sister, too young to remember the war, conspire to break the spell Ratcliffe has cast over the older woman, but Ratcliffe turns out to be a lonely man worthy of compassion. Parallel to that development, the reader perceives that Adams moves gradually from satirical depiction of a morally degenerate post-Civil War America to an ethical analysis and judgments within a zone of humanistic ambiguities that embraces quite enough faith in the future of democracy.

If we read **Democracy** in light of the fact that it was Adams's first publication, it may illuminate our understanding of his successive works: his biography of John Randolph, the autobiographical novel *Esther*, the nine volume history of the administrations of Jefferson and Madison, the visionary *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*, the innovative autobiography, *The Education of Henry Adams*, and finally *A Letter to American Teachers of History*, works spanning three decades. J.C. Levenson provides contexts for a reading of Adams's works in his study *The Mind and Art of Henry Adams*.

Esther is modeled closely on Adams's wife, Clover, the former Marion Hooper, a photographer, who was so devastated by the death of her father that she committed suicide by drinking photographic chemicals. That is her profile in

the famous Augustus Saint-Gaudens sculpture, the Henry and Marion Adams monument, in Rock Creek Cemetery a mile or so north of the Capitol.

The production of the opera and its enthusiastic critical reception in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* dramatizes my theory that the Civil War is most relevant for Americans today when great emphasis is placed on examination of the Reconstruction era, as succinctly expressed in the *Times* headline: Corruption and Scandal of Oldà. With U.S. Grant in Good Voice. To study Grant the President is to study Grant the General. Henry Adams started doing that a few years after the end of the Civil War, Grant the General, exemplar of the good and the bad in the war, being implicit in Grant the President, exemplar of the good and the bad in the Union that so many had died to preserve. Romulus Linney followed Adams in 1968, three years after the end of the Civil War Centennial Commemoration, with **Democracy and Esther**, his play adaptation of Adams's two novels combined.

The Education of Henry Adams is a one of the monuments of American autobiography, which may be viewed profitably alongside another monumental work, *Personal Memoirs* by Ulysses S. Grant, published by Mark Twain. Loyal to America in his own individualistic way, Adams is famous for having expressed in much of his writing a prophetic lack of faith in the progress of American democracy. Author of four novels, including *The Jesus Tales*, and scores of produced and published plays, Linney has also criticized American values on elevated moral grounds. But Linney, now 74, is one of the most neglected American playwrights (ironically, his daughter Laura is justly famous as an Oscar-nominated actress). Linney's historical sense stretches from Jesus to King Frederick of Prussia to poets of the '40s, *Klonsky and Schwartz*, about the ill-fated poet Delmore Schwartz, his newest play, premiered this February.

Out of his 20th century sensibility, Linney the playwright describes two products--made one in his play and libretto adaptations--of the sensibility of Adams 19th century novelist: Democracy was considered at the time scandalous gossip of amorous corruption in Washington. *Esther*, beloved by Adams and ignored by the public, was an idealization of his wife, and a loving tribute to the warmth and honesty of a troubled personality. Linney then connects the past with the present: Both novels confront basic American dilemmas, magnified, it seems to me, by ninety years [now 125] of American life.

Americans, especially those bemused by the Civil War, would do well to read or re-read Adams's two novels and the American theater would do well to produce Romulus Linney's and Scott Wheeler's full-length opera, his first, more often, as one way to understand the war and its aftermath with greater myriadmindedness.

I also suggest we rediscover another work about Grant, the 1900 biography written by Owen Wister, famous for his classic western novel *The Virginian*. And while I am tacking on recommendations, I invite readers to discover Four Civil War Paintings by Winslow Homer, four poems in *Delights and Shadows* by our current poet laureate, Ted Kooser.

Founding Director of the United States Civil War Center and founder of the Civil War Book Review, David Madden is most recently the editor, with long introductions, of Thomas Wolfe's Civil War and a reprint of Loss of the Sultana and Reminiscences of Survivors. In a collection of his essays to be published in the fall, Touching the Web of Southern Writers, he makes much of the effect of the war upon Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, James Agee, Carson McCullers, Katherine Anne Porter, among others. Appearing at the same time will be a collection of essays by several critics and writers about Madden's work called David Madden: A Writer for All Genres. He is on sabbatical finishing two new novels and planning three innovative books about the Civil War. This month, he received the Robert Penn Warren Award for Fiction from the Fellowship of Southern Writers.