

Civil War Treasures: A Legacy of Children's Civil War Literature in Words and Pictures: The Michael Lehman Williamson Collection of Civil War Books for Young People

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Feature Essay

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Lacher-Feldman, Jessica *Civil War Treasures: A Legacy of Children's Civil War Literature in Words and Pictures: The Michael Lehman Williamson Collection of Civil War Books for Young People.*

In 1994, in honor of his son's passing, B. Lehman Williamson established the *Michael Lehman Williamson Collection of Civil War Books for Young People*. This collection features books about aspects of the Civil War, published from 1862 to the present. This collection, with over 900 books about the Civil War written specifically for children, includes a broad range of genres, including fiction, non-fiction, and biographical profiles.

In 2002 Hill Memorial Library used a selection from this collection for an exhibit, *Blue and Gray for Boys and Girls: An Exhibition of Children's Civil War Literature*. The exhibit was a project of the then United States Civil War Center, and documentation of that exhibition, including photographs and a bibliography are available at the LSU Libraries website.

The collection is significant as a unique body of materials reflecting this particular subject, a focus solely on books geared towards a young audience. Scholars and students interested in the history of reading, children's literature, historiography, and a host of other topics would find these materials of particular interest, and those who wish to explore a long range view of representations of the Civil War specifically targeted at young American audiences will find this collection invaluable for that purpose.

While the breadth of the collection is impressive in size, span of decades, and its thoroughness, there is another particular draw which makes the collection important for scholars of a different stripe, specifically those looking at the book as "object" – exploring design, publishing history, and the choices made to market books to intended audiences.

Books from around 1880 through about 1910 are especially important, interesting (and collectible!) because of their design, illustrating how the Civil

War was graphically portrayed. This graphic imagery was presented to young people, as well as the adults who most often purchased these books for children as gifts, or for public or school libraries, and represented not only an interest in the war itself, but reflected an interaction with a time that was still tangible and palpable across the United States. It is certain that these early readers, just fifteen to forty-five years beyond the end of the Civil War, had a personal connection through a grandparent, parent, neighbor, or teacher who served, was wounded, or perhaps died as a result of the Civil War.

The sometimes vivid, sometimes graphic, and sometimes very serious images are an interesting reflection of how books were marketed to a young audience at a particular time and place. Heroics, action, romance, nationalism, violence, austerity, and more, all have a place on these covers, and it can be imagined that they didn't just inspire thought, but they inspired a desire to read.

The historian Jim Cullen points out that most of the American public has been exposed to the Civil War not through academic work but through popular culture. Americans continue to be moved by the romanticism and drama of the era, absorbing the Civil War via motion pictures and television mini-series. During the publishers' bindings era, roughly 1884 – 1930, the Civil War served as the basis for hundreds of novels, poems, songs, humorous writings, and of course, children's stories.

Children were, in no doubt, excited and inspired by the content of these books. While many are illustrated and have brilliant covers, it is the books of the latter part of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century that capture the imagination of not only the reader, but of this librarian, who imagines, in an era before comic books, radio, and television, the hours of fascination, thought, leisure time, and expression that were drawn from these book covers alone.

It is through the generosity and vision of B. Lehman Williamson, who passed away in September of 2015 that this important collection is available in LSU Libraries Special Collections for scholars and students of all ages. Mr. Williamson's gift, and his legacy will live on in this growing collection, as the Civil War continues to fascinate readers of all ages.

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