

REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS: Discovering New Civil War Genres

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Feature Essay

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Madden, David *REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS: Discovering New Civil War Genres.*

Discovering New Civil War Genres

Dear Belle: Letters from a Cadet and Officer to his Sweetheart, 1858-1865

Narrative and Editing by Catherin S. Crary

Foreword by Bruce Catton

With drawings by Cevile Johnson

A new Civil War history genre will soon see the light in your eyes, dear reader. An anthology of short collections of letters and memoirs will appear soon from the University of Tennessee Press.

I learned that while conversing with Scot Danforth, acquisitions editor, about several projects we had underway. I made the observation that while many collections of letters and many memoirs by single individuals have been published for everyone to read, a plenitude of short collections of letters and short memoirs remain unseen by all but historians in archives throughout the nation because they are too brief to be published as books and because few Civil War publications are interested in publishing them. I then made the brilliant suggestion that publishers ought to consider bringing out anthologies of short letter collections and memoirs. Scot agreed and informed me that UT Press had such a book in the works.

But I was holding another brilliant idea in my other hand. While *Century Magazine* published brief memoirs by Civil War officers that were collected into *Battles and Leaders*, the famous four volumes, voraciously read and consulted by the general public as well as historians, many articles about the war years by

civilians were also published in that magazine but have not been collected. Yes, he confirmed, that is indeed a brilliant idea, and so a book was born (and not on a cell phone)àa companion to *Battles and Leaders* that will include those superb drawings.

Similar nonmilitary articles about the war and reconstruction years might be rediscovered and culled from *Harper's* and *Frank Leslie's Weekly*. Perusal of *Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine*, *Pearson's*, and other women's publications might well reveal pieces to include the book, or series of books.

The conception of these two new genres first came to me while I was directing the United States Civil War center, but I remembered them when I was reading **Dear Belle** because that book struck me as an unusual presentation of a collection of Civil War letters. Instead of publishing a young officer's letters to a young lady one by one, with heavy footnoting to set the context for each, giving the reader far more information than the letter writer could have had on the occasion of each letter (perhaps could have had in his whole lifetime), Catherine S. Crary seamlessly weaves key passages from the letters into an unbroken narrative, with very few footnotes.

Tully McCrea's regular, voluminous, and well-written letters to his younger cousin Belle McCrea constitute a collection unusual among published Civil War letters because they span a decade (1858-1865), half the book telling the story of McCrea's experiences as a cadet at West Point, the second half rendering his involvement in key campaigns and battles as an officer. He was briefly Custer's roommate (and questions his honesty); he directed artillery on Cemetery Ridge during Pickett's charge at Gettysburg. Belle cherished the letters enough to preserve them until her death in 1929 (Tully died in 1918).

That Tully and Belle were sweethearts appealed to me, but the value of the letters is enhanced by the relative absence of sweet nothings and the presence above all of a sense of the intimacy of relatives of opposite sex. Readers of letters, especially of Civil War letters which are often over-interpreted, do well to imagine how the writer regards the type of recipient--sweetheart, male friend, comrade, minister, mother, father, grandparent, sister, friend of either sexàand to listen for the unspoken, to imagine why a writer chooses certain events, details, comments and chooses the words to describe and express them.

Forty years after its initial publication in the final year of the Civil War centennial and only 5 years before the sesquicentennial, **Dear Belle** deserves reprinting, along with many more unusual books, so that purely military books do not once again command the field.

Founding director of the United States Civil War Center and creator of The Civil War Book Review, David Madden has written and edited five books on the war, including his novel Sharpshooter.

O. Henry's *Civil War Surprises* is forthcoming. *Touching the Web of Southern Writers, a collection of his essays, several dealing with the Civil War, has just been published. A book about his life and writings, David Madden: A Writer for All Genres, will appear in early fall.*