

Civil War Treasures: The Efficacy Of Confederate Relics In The Poetry And Short Fiction Of One Southern Family

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Recommended Citation

Rasmussen, Hans (2016) "Civil War Treasures: The Efficacy Of Confederate Relics In The Poetry And Short Fiction Of One Southern Family," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.18.4.04

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol18/iss4/31>

Feature Essay

Fall 2016

Rasmussen, Hans C. *Civil War Treasures: The Efficacy of Confederate Relics in the Poetry and Short Fiction of One Southern Family.*

In an interview with a Baton Rouge radio station in 1968, John Hazard Wildman, an author and English professor at Louisiana State University, explained his inspiration for “The Sword,” a short story that soon would appear in LSU’s esteemed literary journal, *The Southern Review*. He recalled his great aunt, the younger sister of a Confederate officer who had died in the war, whom he had known when still a boy in Mobile. Wildman credited her as the model for the story’s protagonist, casually revealing, “Actually, the story is about her. She suggested it to me. Her personality—her pugnacious personality—and genteel poverty and all sorts of things like that. Now, actually, the story itself is purely fictitious. It has nothing much to do with fact, but the pugnacious nature of the lady in it is definitely my great aunt Fannie.”¹ While Wildman incorporated his great aunt’s stoic and sternly dignified personality into the story—as well as indirect references to his great uncle—his family also contributed a more critical inspiration for the tale: a piece of poetry copied, perhaps by one of his great aunts, that expressed a precarious faith in the Confederate past and its relics that his own story would repudiate.

John Boylston Hazard was born on June 6, 1841, in Mobile, Alabama, the only son of Charles Courtlandt Hazard and Cornelia Livingston Hazard. He served as a captain in the 24th Alabama Infantry Regiment, Company I during the Civil War, and his service and other wartime experiences are documented in a series of letters preserved among his grandnephew’s papers.² His correspondents included his parents and siblings Camilla (“Cam”), Cornelia (“Neeny”), Frances (“Fanny”), Mary Whitaker (“Mane”), and brother-in-law, Benjamin Andrews Whitaker (“Ben”). Hazard was captured at the Battle of Missionary Ridge on November 25, 1863, and transferred to Johnson’s Island Prison, a prisoner-of-war camp for Confederate officers on an island in Lake Erie across the bay from Sandusky, Ohio, on December 7. Suffering from cold and without adequately warm clothing, he took ill and died of diphtheria on

December 31, 1863.³

Before he passed away, Captain Hazard entrusted his effects to his first lieutenant, James T. Bell, with the request that he bring his uniform home to his mother.⁴ Whether he did or did not is unknown, but a manuscript poem copied by a member of his family suggests Bell may have succeeded in his pledge. “The Jacket of Gray” by Caroline Augusta Ball, first published in 1866, was a sentimental ballad of heartfelt loss that became tremendously popular across the South after the war.⁵ Although the poem expressed devotion to the southern cause, it was far more of an elegy mourning a dead soldier, replete with images of a mother giving up her son to fight and the family grieving bitterly at his death. Understandably, the poem would have been appreciated by the surviving women of the Hazard family, enough to motivate one of them to make a copy, as a few stanzas demonstrate. His young comrades found him, and tenderly bore
The cold lifeless form to his home on the shore; Oh, dark were our hearts on that
terrible day, When we saw our dead boy in the jacket of gray. Ah! spotted and
tattered, and stained now with gore, Was the garment which once so he so
proudly wore; We bitterly wept as we took it away, And replaced with death’s
white robes the jacket of gray. We laid him to rest in his cold narrow bed, And
graved on the marble we placed o’er his head As the proudest tribute our sad
hearts could pay— “He never disgraced it, the jacket of gray.”

“The Jacket of Gray” was published immediately after the war when memorialization of the Confederate cause focused entirely on mourning the dead, as the better known martial celebration of the Lost Cause awaited a post-Reconstruction future. Nonetheless, the poem (especially its opening and closing stanzas) revealed an early interest in honoring relics from the war and drawing comfort from their presence. Fold it up carefully, lay it aside; Tenderly touch it, look on it with pride; For dear to our hearts must it be evermore, The jacket of gray our loved soldier-boy wore.

This postwar faith in Confederate relics was a theme that Captain Hazard’s grandnephew would treat in his own story a century later, only with a trust less sure.

The year before his interview, Wildman introduced the inaugural issue of *The New South Quarterly*, an independent literary journal published by current and former LSU students, with a call for renewal in southern literature. “But particularly the South needs this not in any narrow, sectional, parochial,

professional sense. The Stars and Bars have a slashingly bright design and a splendid connotation, but they are worse for literature than an iced-tea glass of cheap gin.”⁶ Regretting how Lost Cause devotion failed to improve southern letters, Wildman decided to undermine this civil religion and its faith in questionable relics.

“The Sword” tells of Emma Garth Markson, an aged southern spinster who lives poor and alone in a rickety old house accompanied only by a cat, nurturing her garden and a fierce sense of familial pride. She reveres her late uncle’s Confederate officer’s sword that she had purchased from an unappreciative, ne’er-do-well relative. It becomes for her a totem to vicariously escape her poverty and celebrate her uncle’s “splendid cause (about whose nature Miss Emma was dogmatically, happily, bigotedly vague).” She is crestfallen when a predatory antique dealer tells her the sword is not Confederate, but rather a cheap Union sabre. Another more sympathetic broker reveals the apparently well-known story of how her relative had sold her uncle’s sword to a collector in Philadelphia, replacing it with a cheaper federal one she bought in a pawn shop in that city. The revelations are crushing, compelling her to throw the sword in the garbage and embrace her devastating loss of everything she had held dear. Instead, she finds solace in a picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the kindness of neighbors and relatives before her death.⁷

Wildman patterned the Confederate uncle after his own great uncle through details of his youth, his officer rank, and his death of disease while a prisoner of war. The fictional Austen Ullathorne Markson “was young and quite handsome. He had had his picture taken in the uniform of a Confederate officer. Shortly afterwards, he had gone off to war and within a relatively brief time he had been captured. He had died of smallpox in a Northern prison.” But unlike the poetic (and perhaps literal) gray jacket in which his ancestors found solace, the false Confederate sword in his short story cannot provide comfort. Instead, Emma Markson, a devout Catholic, must turn to Christ to cope with her loss. “... She took the picture down and put it on the wall where the sword had hung. In a few days, she found herself unable to do anything, even to loosen the black, natively rich earth around the few larkspur that had survived in a spot half shaded from the fierce sun. She took to her bed in a spirit of simple inevitability and spent her time partly napping, partly watching the picture, partly in a strange state in which she either held conversations with the picture or was one with it. “I’ve lost everything,” she once told it; and it answered, “So did I. That’s the way you find everything.”

Wildman's dim value of Confederate relics and the traditions that had empowered them, and his corresponding commendation of Christian faith to take their place, undoubtedly arose from his own conversion to Catholicism in 1945. His assessment was likewise reminiscent of Walker Percy's trenchant evaluation of the inadequacy of southern values that he had expressed in his noted 1956 essay, "Stoicism in the South." Percy, also an Alabama native who similarly had converted to Catholicism in 1947, observed, "We in the South can no longer afford the luxury of maintaining the Stoa beside the Christian edifice. In the past we managed the remarkable feat of keeping both, one for living in, the other for dying in. ... The white Southerner, Catholic and Protestant, has been invited either to go inside the [Christian] edifice he has built or to consider what he is doing on the porch at all."⁸ For Wildman, traditional southern stoicism grimly maintained in genteel poverty was no way to live and false relics possessed no power to redeem; rather, the South needed to embrace its Christian tradition as a more joyful philosophy both to live in and to die in.

¹ Audio interview with Orene Muse (1968), John Hazard Wildman Papers, Mss. 1966, 1967, 2010, 2095, 2169, 2237, 2249, 2371, 2437, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La., box 15.

² John Hazard Wildman Papers, box 3.

³ James T. Bell Letter, Mss. 3453, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.

⁴ James T. Bell letter to George Starr, January 18, 1864, in John Hazard Wildman Papers, box 3, folder 9.

⁵ Caroline Augusta Ball, "The Jacket of Gray," in *The Columbia Book of Civil War Poetry*, ed. Richard Marius (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 399-401; Manuscript in John Hazard Wildman Papers, box 3, folder 14.

⁶ *The New South Quarterly*, October 1967.

⁷ John Hazard Wildman, "The Sword," *Southern Review* 4 (April 1968): 415-22; Typescript in John Hazard Wildman Papers, box 13, folder 8.

⁸ Walker Percy, “Stoicism in the South,” in *Signposts in a Strange Land*, ed. Patrick Samway (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991), 86.