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## Interview

### CWBR AUTHOR INTERVIEW: THE REBEL YELL: A CULTURAL HISTORY

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Interview with Craig A. Warren, Associate Professor of English and Professional Writing at Penn State Erie, The Behrend College

Interviewed by Zach Isenhower

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**Civil War Book Review (CWBR):** Today the Civil War Book Review is happy to speak with Craig A. Warren, Associate Professor of English and Professional Writing at Penn State Erie, the Behrend College. Professor Warren previously authored *Scars to Prove It: The Civil War Soldier and American Fiction*, and today we get to discuss his most recent book, *The Rebel Yell: A Cultural History*. Professor Warren, thank you for joining us today.

**Craig A. Warren:** Thanks for having me, I appreciate it.

**CWBR:** We always start out by asking because it's always an interesting question, especially in this case with this subject that hasn't been in historiography for quite some time, what was it that drew you to this project?

**Warren:** I became really interested in the rebel yell in the summer of 2008. At that time my first book had just gone to press. To a large extent that book is about the memoirs of Civil War veterans and southern women on the home front. I came away from that project tremendously impressed by the ability of everyday Americans to put on the page some of the abstractions of war. Things such as freedom, democracy, and human dignity. I also became aware of where these writers struggled to represent certain phenomena in print and to communicate it to the reader. One of those areas, interestingly enough, was the legendary battle cry of Confederate soldiers, the rebel yell, and I saw writers struggling to

represent it on the page. Some were trying to spell it out with vowels, consonants, and exclamation marks etc. That didn't satisfactorily convey this ferocious battle cry to the reader. Others adopted different strategies by using metaphor, saying the rebel yell sounded like the squealing brakes of a runaway train, or it sounded like the howling of wolves, and even a hurricane. This was not satisfying either since these three things don't necessarily sound alike. Also a frame of reference we are familiar with doesn't seem to connect with a Civil War battlefield. Then some just gave up altogether, which my favorite was the Union veteran and writer Ambrose Bierce who simply said the rebel yell was, "the ugliest sound that any mortal have ever heard." I saw these different attempts to describe the rebel yell, all of which failed to a large extent. As a literary critic I was interested in the limitations of language to describe a sonic phenomenon, but as a cultural historian I quickly became interested in the rebel yell for other reasons as well. The more I looked into it the more I realized it had this really rich and vibrant career after the Civil War, all through Reconstruction and the Gilded Age and the early twentieth century. I think that's a history that most people still today are completely unaware of. That really got me interested to dig and understand the yell better, and to understand its evolving meaning and purposes for subsequent generations of Americans.

**CWBR:** I do want to come back to the sonic aspect and the limitations of the language, but before we get into all the details maybe it would be helpful to have a quick overview of the career the yell had that you mentioned. You found that it started from unclear but probably varied origins, to become what we are familiar with historically as a particular battle cry, but it changes a lot even after that.

**Warren:** That's right. As with any human language or expression the rebel has, as you say, murky origins. Everything evolves from a complicated matrix and linguists do their best to patch together where human languages come from and how they evolve and change. It seems that the Antebellum South was absolutely awash with different kinds of high pitched yelling. Some was related to animal husbandry calling to animals, shepherding animals. Some had to do with rural life, communicating with neighbors and family members over long distances. There were also hunting cries used by every class strata in the Antebellum South. Then there were Native American war cries which could be heard through the 1830's and in some frontier communities in the south. Over a period of time it seems that all these different sounds and styles of noisemaking change how southern communities, in a broad sense, approached standard cheering. Unlike in northern populations and communities where cheering

typically took the form of noisemaking in unison in a standard way like 'Hoorah, hoorah,' it seemed that in the South, both in town and in rural communities, cheering took the sound of free-form screeching, overlapping noises usually at a high pitch, lacking words or word sounds. When the Civil War began, it seems to me that this style of cheering just came naturally to most folks in the South, and was translated from a civilian life to the battlefield, the camp, and the march. It's sort of a mistake to think the rebel yell was exclusively a phenomenon to the battlefield. Southern troops used it in lots of different ways and in different contexts. In any case it became a battle cry and as you were saying after the war, it did change. For a long time was seen as a, I would say, kind of defiant statement of white southerners that they were still here and living through Federal occupation, but they were not foregoing their traditions. It was used in some cases of racial violence against freedmen. It was used in scenes of insurrection. The Crescent City White League, a white paramilitary organization was using the rebel yell while battling troops in blue in New Orleans. It was used in political contexts whenever different political parties would get their candidates together. The rebel yell was often sounded by old Confederate veterans now in support of new political measures. This goes on through the Spanish American War, and I don't know how much you want me to get into its career as a battle cry in 1898, but it's a major sociopolitical barometer of intersectional hostility in some cases, but also reconciliation as well. It's not until the twentieth century that we see the rebel yell eclipsed by the Confederate battle flag as a major symbol of white southern identity.

**CWBR:** One thing that struck me, going back to the origins of the yell, was this odd obsession, given how familiar most southerners would have been with all the different possibilities for its origins whether it be Indian battle cries or hunting calls, anything like that with figuring out a single source, and I was curious about that.

**Warren:** Yeah, I think its human nature. We like to be detectives to try and find out the one single place where a particular expression began or where particular human behavior started. Really I think that's fool's gold, there's not going to be, when it comes to human language, one single beginning for virtually anything. I think that what happened with that obsession during the decades following the Civil War, with the origin of rebel yell, was that a lot of people began to understand the rebel yell existed somehow as the voice of the South. That's how it was often characterized. That being the case, anyone who had a particular political or cultural agenda and wanted to represent true southern

identity as belonging to a particular region, people, class, or political party would adopt the rebel yell as their own and try to make the case for its origins falling in line with their personal interests. For instance, if you wanted represent the South as this romantic, agrarian, cavalier society then you make the argument that, "oh the rebel yell derived from the fox-hunting cries of plantation owners." If you instead want to make the case of true southern identity is in that blue collar work ethic of yeoman farmers then you say, "well the rebel yell derives from rabbit hunting calls that these farmers would voice after tending their fields during the daytime." If you want to represent the South as a multi-racial society then you say, "oh it derives from Native American battle cries" or you suggest even that the rebel yell ironically enough began with slave songs and celebrations and those were passed on to their white masters. I guess what I'm getting at is the rebel yell becomes a political or cultural chess piece. People interested in trying to define the South in a particular way are going to interoperate its origins accordingly.

**CWBR:** In defining its origins it also, it was interesting to me, generates quite a bit more commentary than I had read anywhere else on how it was that northern soldiers supposedly cheered as well.

**Warren:** That became something that for us today is kind of amusing, to see northern and southern veterans crossing pens after the war describing the difference between northern battle cries and southern. Northern troops seem to yell in a European and British style which is a low register, in unison, give a 'hoorah, hoorah.' They said this is the manly, deep-breasted cheer of the northern soldier. They all did it in unison and that sits very well with the concept of Union and togetherness. The southern veterans though, thought that was all clockwork and mechanical. They thought that kind of cheering was appropriate for northern factory workers who never saw sunlight and never got outside or had any individualism at all. They prized the rebel yell and said, here's a battle cry which each individual contributed his own preferred pitch and sequence of sounds to the collective whole, and it's not a kind of cheering by rows, but instead free-form screeching, and all that overlapping sound creates a unified cacophony. The different sides found ways to talk about their style and mood of cheering as a way to describe their political approach to conflict and democracy. Are we representing a united front or are we each doing our own thing together? I think that's really interesting symbolically. There's a lot to be said about how the rebel yell was different from the style of cheering in other sections of the U.S. and in Europe at the time. I think it does speak to the fact that the American South,

although it had lots of shared characteristics and origins with the North, did have different cultural attitudes and origins owing to its region and to its people, which white southerners were encountering in the generation leading up to this whole war.

**CWBR:** It is interesting to me that these northern veterans and southern veterans, as they're sort of sparring in various written pieces, are more or less in agreement on what makes a northern yell different from a southern yell, it's just they disagree on whether this is a good or bad thing, in their characteristics. Yet both interpretations lend themselves pretty readily to the growing Lost Cause ideology of the South being overcome by this tremendously more numerous, more industrial force, and really the ideology goes out of the equation.

**Warren:** Right, I think that what happens over time is that as the two sections move towards reconciliation there becomes this need for mutual respect. Northern veterans instead of saying, "oh this high pitched rebel yell was effeminate, or it was wild and incoherent, and it represents everything that was wrong with secession," began instead to praise the rebel yell as a unique American voice, voiced by a worthy opponent who, "though defeated in battle, nonetheless had lots of virtues in terms of honor and dedication and commitment to cause." If it does get discussion, the rebel yell gets incorporated into this drive towards reconciliation, which was not shared by everyone by any means, but in large contours there's this movement towards reconciliation. It gets to the point where after a while, you begin to see the rebel yell embraced by people in the north and northern readers and newspapers are writing to southerners asking if they can describe the rebel yell in print or help them to better understand it. It becomes almost a kind of shared American achievement and I noted earlier that it took part in the Spanish-American War. By 1898, I would suggest the rebel yell became the de facto battle cry of the U.S. military. It was used on San Juan Hill and then the Philippines and elsewhere, taught to Northern troops and even African American troops by Southerners. After the war former Northern officers coming back to Washington D.C. in 1898 were serenaded by the rebel yell at the nation's capital, which must have been really disorienting for them considering their previous experience with it, but it had become a national battle cry. I think you are right to say that it is an evolving experience and its meaning for the nation, and not just for the South, changes over time.

**CWBR:** That Spanish-American war moment was particularly striking, because it really does look for a moment that the rebel yell is going to become a

newly fully incorporated American military tradition and it's going to be that shared American achievement you mentioned. All signs point to increased popularity, then what? Two or three years later it retreats, what happened?

**Warren:** I think there was no longer the urgency on the part of white Southerners to prove their loyalty to the larger United States. That is what a lot of rhetoric was about during the Spanish-American War. People are saying, "oh look how the South is now sending its officers and men to support the United States and now they're wearing the blue uniforms as well and so forth." After the Spanish-American War I think that Southern loyalty has been proven, so there's not this urgency in the part of the South to share the rebel yell with the North, so I think that's one of the reasons why there's this retreat of its use. I also think that by the turn of the century, and I say this in the book, the rebel yell is no longer a military phenomenon. By then it's been used and practiced by subsequent generations of civilians, people whose fathers and grandfathers had been Civil War soldiers and had taught that to them. We start seeing it also used in political spheres, the term rebel yell becomes an expression that's used to denote certain political perspectives. It's just not strictly a military phenomenon anymore and I talk about its growing demilitarization after 1898. So for me the Spanish-American War represents its zenith as a shared national battle cry and after the rebel yell, both screeching and name brand of the rebel yell, moves increasingly to the civilian sector.

**CWBR:** Was it the civilian sector then that was most responsible for the fact that, as we get past the Spanish-American War, you start to describe these multiple personalities for the rebel yell, so that there's still a Southern defiant yell that especially comes out in as a result of the Civil Rights movement, but then there's also what you called a "cartoon yell?"

**Warren:** Yeah, you know it's true. Once it's no longer seen as this terrifying ferocious battle cry, as it was described immediately after the war (veterans were writing about it in those terms), people begin to see it as an expression of life and vitality. People talk about the rebel yell as what Walt Whitman would call a "barbaric yawp," declaring oneself's place in the universe. It becomes something that screamed out at sporting events and race tracks. It becomes a fun-loving expression. Certainly during the Civil Rights movement the mid-twentieth century, segregationists started using the rebel yell in a throwback way as during the Civil War itself but at the same time there's what I call the cartoon rebel yell was firmly placed as the sort of teenage hijinks yell, screeching out while driving

90 miles per hour down a country lane. It has multiple personas all at once, which is one of the reasons why I thought it was such an interesting phenomenon.

**CWBR:** We also cannot talk about its change without discussing the context of what might be replacing it. So especially when we are getting into the Civil Rights era, and the visual aspect is so important there, you write that that's true as well for how the yell is regarded, right?

**Warren:** The rebel yell, we have to remember, emerged from the nineteenth century. It's invisible, intangible, just really much more at home in a culture that was oriented toward sound. There are critics that have done a great job about talking about how sound was so important to nineteenth century America. That's one reason why today we have a hard time understanding why people would go and listen to three-hour-long oratory, but that was something that was part of their culture, perhaps especially in the South. As we get in the twentieth century, especially after World War II, we are now in a culture of images, with the advent of televisions and motion pictures. Increasingly people are looking for visual symbols culturally and politically. What happens, to my mind, is that the rebel yell is no longer as much at home in that kind of society. So the use of the yell as the dominant symbol of white southern identity is eclipsed by that Confederate battle flag, which had largely gone dormant from about 1865 to 1948 or so, when the Dixiecrats adopted it and it started beginning to be used for other purposes. John Coski's excellent book *The Confederate Battle Flag* charts this evolution about how the battle flag was largely used just in ceremonial ways through Reconstruction in the Gilded Age, but really came into its own as a controversial and important symbol around 1950. That was helpful for me because I began to see how in his description of the career of the battle flag, how it was following many of the same contours we had seen the career of the rebel yell established. I began to ask what the difference here is. Well one major difference is that the flag is visible and it's more dignified to be suited for a governor's office or for a state capital than the rebel yell, which is more of a ragged, raw expression of self. The rebel yell is better suited for a street fight than for a governor's office. I think that's one reason why we see the battle flag eclipsing the yell as a major symbol right around 1948-50.

**CWBR:** It's not too long after that, that it seems to me like the yell experiences an effort to re-imbue it with a bit of the original ferocity and gravitas that it originally had. You mentioned there's another personality, the "lost yell."



**Warren:** It's true, it wasn't that there was a clear passing from the yell towards the flag. There was an overlap for a while, the same places the segregationists are waving the Confederate battle flag such as from University of Mississippi in 1962 when James Meredith was enrolling. At the same time that those flags are being waved, protestors were also shouting the rebel yell. There is this throwback, but at the same time there is this new movement to which I refer to as the concept of the "myth of the lost yell," which suggests that the rebel yell has been lost to history. That began with a handful of Confederate veterans at the end of the nineteenth century who didn't like how the rebel yell was being used by civilians. They thought it was being treated irreverently, and used as a party trick. They wanted it to be treated as a dignified anthem for a particular time and place, the Confederacy of 1861-65. They wanted to cordon it off from its irreverent use and said, "Oh it's been lost forever and you can never hear it after Appomattox." Lots of other veterans, though, were demonstrating the rebel yell quite willingly at banquets. The argument about the lost yell never got a lot of traction until most veterans passed away. Then people like Shelby Foote, who had a particular cultural agenda, began pushing again the concept of the lost yell. Over time people began to embrace the idea that "we may have a facsimile of the rebel yell today but we really don't know exactly how it sounded but the true rebel yell has been lost," so you see this movement as well. I think what Shelby Foote and others were trying to do was to distance the rebel yell from what they would see as its abuses in the mid-twentieth century. They didn't like the KKK using the Confederate battle flag during the Civil Rights Movement, or the segregations using the rebel yell, which made them think that it was spoiling what these nineteenth century artifacts had been used for initially, and they should not dishonor them in that way. They suggested that these things are actually dead and gone forever. They said that the rebel yell, like Southern oratory had been lost. I suggest in my book that it's a myth and that there's never been a time since 1865 when we haven't had Confederate veterans willingly give up the rebel yell, or that we haven't had any recordings, audio and visual, of Confederate veterans giving the rebel yell. The idea that it was lost to history is really part of a particular agenda, but it's not a reality.

**CWBR:** Well the recordings that you mention became this really fascinating part of the book where you did quite a bit of sleuthing to dig a little bit into various efforts that have now been made with the miracle of digital technology and what not, to have now a "found yell."

**Warren:** Exactly, I think when Shelby Foote went on Dick Cavett in the 1970's and talked with Ken Burns in that famous PBS documentary *The Civil War* in 1990, we didn't have the World Wide Web yet, on which we could share recordings with the entire world, so it was easier than to make the case that the rebel yell has been lost and we don't have any recordings of it. Now that kind of thing can be shared. There was an effort on the part of the Museum of the Confederacy a few years back to try and uncover what they were putting forward as the true yell. They were following the tradition that there had only been one way to give a rebel yell, that everyone who gave the yell did it in the exact same way. There's no historical record to back that up, but they latched on to that idea. They found a recording the United Daughters of the Confederacy had and then another one across the country thinking they were two separate recordings that lined up and uncovered the true yell. What I do is go through a lot of UDC catalogs and find different radio stations who played recordings of the yell over the last several decades and try to show that actually the Museum of Confederacy found the same recording twice. It wasn't a one true yell that was offered by different guys and units, but actually the same recording. I hope that what I have done in looking at that and trying to figure out exactly what's been recorded and when or who by, is that there was no true way of giving the rebel yell. Every soldier has his own preferred way of doing it, and I would suggest every soldier gave a slightly different rebel yell from one occasion to the next. So the found yell was really that realization, that there was no one way to do it and the fact that we now have the World Wide Web and technology is better to share those kinds of things. We can look at what the Library of Congress has, to look at their audio and visual recordings of Confederate veterans giving an individual yell or collective yells. This is available now at the Smithsonian website actually. I like to think now we can get past a lot of the myths that have grown around the rebel yell and better understand its real evolution for what it means for our country.

**CWBR:** So what do you see as the importance of the historical debate over the yell as its going on into the twenty-first century, trading its particular historical meaning in our culture for symbolizing a more general rebelliousness?

**Warren:** One think I learned from this process is that often times passes for history is really an attempt by various commentators to shape the thinking of generations of Americans about American history or Southern history in this case. Really the job of the scholar is to look at different interpretations of the past or cultural artifacts and try to approach it in that sort of neutral objective way, and see how these markers have been used to front a particular agenda, and to

understand how American culture develops overtime in accordance with these perspectives that are maybe politically motivated or culturally or socially motivated. In terms of what I've learned about the yell's shift from one particular use on a battlefield for instance for being used for commercial purposes and everything else, it's that a cultural icon really cannot be contained. Shelby Foote and others might want us to say that this artifact is lost forever and lost to history, but cultural artifacts are not lost. They evolve over time, they change over time. You see this when Billy Idol can use the rebel yell this British rocker having it on a song or an album or whenever the rebel yell is used now as a name for a clothing line or bourbon. You see how these things can be commercialized, how symbols can change and be adopted for new purposes and new agendas. I think that's the truth in how we approach symbols as people, and to understand that about our images and symbols is important, because it makes us more aware of who we are and how we choose to represent ourselves to the world.

**CWBR:** Professor Warren, I won't ask you to offer your own rendition of the yell, but I thank you for taking a moment to sit down with us today and discuss your new book *The Rebel Yell: A Cultural History*.

**Warren:** Thank you very much for having me, it was a pleasure.