

The Civil War Centennial— Archival Aspects

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U. S. Civil War Centennial Commission

THE CENTENNIAL of the Civil War will end. But the study of that conflict will not end, and we who desire the enduring existence of America's past must prepare as much for the work to come in 1966 as for the commemoration of such events as the battle of Gettysburg, Lincoln's second inaugural address, or the surrender at Appomattox.

Yet archivists and historians already face difficulties in seeking to achieve long-range ends. For in marking the hundredth anniversary of a struggle that, in its high tragedy, was the great watershed of American history, celebration has too often outweighed commemoration. Americans already stand in jeopardy of losing sight of the meaning of the Civil War. By encouragement or by apathy we have left too much of the Centennial in the hands of pure commercialists. As a natural result, a carnival atmosphere too often has characterized our remembrance of, and homage to, the 618,000 Americans who lost their lives in that four-year war. Only in our nation could the past be treated so lightly, and the very fact that some of today's problems not only existed a century ago but, more particularly, led to civil war is inexorable proof that we have learned little and profited even less from the blood-letting of our forefathers.

Three aspects of the Centennial of the Civil War are to some degree responsible for this negligence.

One is the insistence of many people on battle reenactments, of which there have to date been three. The national Centennial Commission deeply hopes that we have seen the last of these spectacles; and, in order to set the record straight, let me express the Commission's feelings on reenactments. We oppose them actively, sincerely, and unwaveringly. We do so because we feel that they

* This paper, by the Executive Director of the U. S. Civil War Centennial Commission, was read on Oct. 2, 1962, at the 26th annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, at Rochester, N. Y. An article on the Commission's plans, by Bell I. Wiley—"The Role of the Archivist in the Civil War Centennial"—was published in the *American Archivist*, 23: 131-142 (Apr. 1960).

mock the dead by providing entertainment on ground that human blood has made sacred. No rational American would think of smearing red paint over the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington Cemetery. Yet is this much worse, for example, than playing soldiers at Gettysburg, where 43,000 men lost life and limb in fighting for their principles? Moreover, if one is going to re-create a battle, one must—for the sake of realism—re-create all aspects of that conflict. Thus far reenactments have depicted and emphasized only the dramatic, colorful, exciting attributes of Civil War battles. Yet how does one portray a soldier, both legs blown off, watching helplessly while life pours from severed arteries? How can one create realistically the horribly fatal agonies of typhoid, tetanus, and gangrene—of which thousands of men, blue and gray, died? And how does one—how can one—convey accurately the feeling of a wife or mother who has just received the cursory notice that half her world has suddenly vanished in the smoke of some distant battle? Bruce Catton, a member of the national Commission, summed up our prevailing sentiments when he stated:

No doubt we shall draw the line somewhere, because the point of these re-enactments is entertainment, and there were things in the Civil War which, even a century later, just are not very entertaining to contemplate. . . . How the Civil War soldier fought his battles is no doubt worth examining, but infinitely more important is a consideration of why he fought and what he accomplished. Lay on the sentiment, the romance, and the dramatic appeal heavily enough, and we shall presently forget that the war was fought by real living men who were deeply moved by thoughts and emotions of overwhelming urgency. To lose sight of the cause that was fought for and the dedication with which it was served is to dishonor the sacrifice, for victor and for vanquished alike.¹

Visit any newsstand, or pick up any magazine that publishes small advertisements, and you can see the second tawdry element of the Centennial. This element poses under several pseudonyms: souvenirs, mementoes, authentic reproductions, "official" Centennial commodities, and so forth. We are overwhelmed by cheaply manufactured junk that discredits both North and South, and I assure you that none of it bears our Commission's stamp of approval. Each of you can readily name one or two items of this sort. One is a cigarette lighter that is imported from a Far Eastern nation noted for its bric-a-brac. On one side of the lighter is a Confederate battle flag—which is rectangular, not square like

¹ "Lest We Forget . . .," in *American Heritage*, vol. 12, no. 5, p. 27 (Aug. 1961).

the true Stars and Bars. On the other side of the lighter is a tattered and grizzled Confederate soldier, brandishing a broken sword and sneering: "Forget, hell!" And on flipping open the lighter, one can be serenaded with the bell-like strains of "Dixie."

Next we have a varied assortment of ashtrays, with bas-reliefs of the faces of notable Civil War leaders embossed in the center. For the small sum of 29c, one can push his lighted cigarette right into the face of Abraham Lincoln or Robert E. Lee and perhaps enjoy sadistic satisfaction. Or, if one prefers the seashore to the wicked weed tobacco, a well-known company offers a towel that is a full replica of the Confederate flag. When confronted with the use of this standard, for which 258,000 Southerners died, to protect sweating posteriors from the irritation of sand, we cannot but reflect on this shameful travesty. It should not happen to a dog—much less to history.

The third unfortunate byproduct of the Centennial affects directly both the archivist and the historian. What we think stems largely from what we read. Whether in politics, society, human behavior, or even public opinion, the printed word has far more influence on us than any constructive meditation of our own—or, if you like, any "power of positive thinking." This is especially true in Civil War history, for in man's long inhumanity to man no other conflict has produced such an outpouring of literature. At the last estimate, more than a hundred thousand books, pamphlets, and articles had been written on the conflict. Simple arithmetic shows that, on an average, three new studies have appeared each day since the men in blue and gray stacked their arms. In view of the quality of most of this literary flood, the wonder is that in the past century civil war has not broken out anew. Indeed, we may say with some validity that a literary vendetta was waged in the half-century after 1865. In this period came the great flood of personal memoirs, often so vituperative as to make such modern military commentators as Field Marshal Montgomery seem like benevolent reporters covering the garden club's monthly tea parties.

In recent years much of the bitterness in Civil War literature has lessened, only to be replaced by a new and equally destructive force. The Centennial, unfortunately, has accelerated this new malignancy. In short, students of the Civil War are reading more now and learning less, simply because we are publishing more books that say less. Original research and conscientious writing have succumbed to scissors-and-paste rehashes on well-known

leaders and fully reported battles. The careful historian has been shoved aside by the prolific journalist, who in a matter of weeks can bang out a shallow study buttressed only by racy writing. (Or, as in the case of one nationally known journalist, some writers can concoct a full exposé of the Civil War and its Centennial in a matter of hours and get it published readily in such magazines as the *Saturday Evening Post*.)

Publishers and booksellers are not solely to blame for encouraging these pseudo-historians. After all, the man who prints the book and the man who sells it are in business. Their livelihood depends on their promotional efforts. Equal blame must rest on incompetent reviewers, who do not know or care enough about a book to evaluate it for an innocent public. Archivists and historians are likewise to blame for not discouraging more actively these worthless historical undertakings. The blame also rests heavily on those who, duped by an exciting title or a gaudy dust jacket, purchase the book and unwittingly absorb from it a mass of misinformation—and at the same time encourage these bandwagon writers to conceive new embryos that should be aborted or stillborn.

By and large, writing on the Civil War to date has been unbalanced. I do not mean necessarily that the authors have been unbalanced—though the writings of some seriously raise that question. Rather, we have overemphasized the popular fields of battles and leaders and have underplayed (if not ignored) equally important nonmilitary aspects. For example, a popular vogue now among Civil War writers is the “day” book. I suspect that Jim Bishop started this trend with *The Day Lincoln Was Shot* and *The Day Christ Died*—two works that many people insist are one and the same. The full potential of this field has not yet been realized. It still remains for Southern writers to come forward with their period books. And what wonderful possibilities exist here for distorting historical fact! How about “The First Day at Gettysburg” or “The First Two Weeks at Vicksburg” or “The First Twenty Minutes at Shiloh”? As you can see, the possibilities for period studies are endless.

Further evidence of the imbalance of Civil War literature can easily be found in the case of Abraham Lincoln. To thousands today he ranks as our greatest American. Yet we have done Lincoln a grave injustice: we have gone too far in our adoration. We have made of him something inhuman, holy, almost angelic. In so doing we have obliterated his unique and memorable human

traits. In the past three decades we have slowly converted Lincoln into something so unreal that schoolboys now question whether he actually existed.

The catalog of the Library of Congress shows that more than 5,000 books and pamphlets have been written on Lincoln. Only Jesus has chalked up a higher score, and He has fared infinitely better at the hands of biographers than has Lincoln. Edmund Wilson recently said that the worst thing that happened to Abraham Lincoln since John Wilkes Booth was Carl Sandburg. This criticism is far too harsh, but it does point up the fact that writers too often paint Lincoln in flashing colors of sentimentality and emotion. The sum total is more the life of a legend than the study of a most remarkable man.

And because we have an overabundance of full-length biographies of Lincoln, we now are flooded with scores of monographs that delve into every facet of Lincoln's life, from the poetry he liked to his favorite foods. Perhaps, as some wag has suggested, the most popular book that could be written on the Civil War would be one entitled "Lincoln's Wife's Doctor's Dog." It would appeal to Lincolmites; it would appeal to women; it would appeal to devotees of "Doctor Kildare"; and it would appeal to animal lovers. That would include almost everybody.

History in general, and Civil War history in particular, must remain a liberal art; it must not become a fine art. If history is to have value, it must be scientific. When Allan Nevins and I joined the national Commission in December of 1961 we both were appalled at how little had been done during the Centennial for the furtherance of scholarship and archival holdings. We immediately launched a new program to correct those shortcomings. Whether we shall ultimately succeed, and whether the Centennial is to be an eventual success, depends in large part on the efforts of you, America's archivists. This Centennial has given rise to an unprecedented interest in our heritage. Thousands of people are beginning to ransack grandpa's trunk or to search through the attic of the old home place. Several State centennial commissions, notably those of Iowa and Indiana, have already initiated statewide "housecleanings" in search of Civil War letters, diaries, photographs, and newspapers. Virginia and other States are beginning such programs this fall.

Archivists must encourage these projects to the full. We desperately need more and more soldiers' letters and memoirs. The States of Indiana and Iowa have shown conclusively that rich

yields can be garnered: the documents are there, though buried in the scrapheaps of yesteryear and well-nigh forgotten. If archivists will but give full cooperation to State centennial commissions and to the many interested historical societies, the Centennial can then



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each archivist lends full support to this undertaking. As you may know, our Commission hopes to begin work soon on a massive Guide to the Study of the Civil War, which will be a detailed, critical bibliography listing every book and pamphlet on the war. It will be indexed and cross-referenced for easy use, and we anticipate that supplemental volumes will be issued every ten years. There is no reason why a similar work could not and should not be undertaken for manuscript sources. We welcome your suggestions, and we earnestly enlist your aid and support.

We must not, however, limit our collecting merely to letters and diaries. Of equal importance to us are photographs and other illustrations. We have but scratched the surface in that field. For example, until recently I had thought that Mathew P. Brady, Alexander Gardner, Edwin Forbes, and one or two others comprised the full roster of Civil War photographers and illustrators. Yet Josephine Cobb of the National Archives, certainly the leading iconographer of the Civil War, knocked me off my feet last week with a startling statement. Her research shows that no less than 308 photographers were attached to the Army of the Potomac alone! Where are their pictures? How could they and their work have been forgotten? Here again the archivist can give us answers.

In one other endeavor we of the national Commission need your help. So little scholarly work has been done on the nonmilitary aspects of the Civil War that Dr. Nevins and I have felt obligated to initiate a new publications program. This we have done, with the welcome assistance of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. We call this the "Impact Series." It will contain 15 volumes, each 350 to 400 pages in length, each dealing with the impact of the Civil War on a specific phase of American life, and each written by an outstanding scholar in its special field. For example, Merle Curti at the University of Wisconsin is writing the volume on the impact of the war on poverty, crime, and charities; Richard Harwell of Bowdoin College is doing the volume on the Civil War as it affected American recreation and entertainment; Paul Gates at Cornell is writing on agriculture and the Civil War; Harold Hyman of U.C.L.A. is studying the impact of the war on constitutional and statutory law; William Greenfield of New Hampshire is delving into the effect of the war on business organization and leadership; and I am doing a critical survey of Northern writings about the war for a volume to be entitled (perhaps facetiously) "The North to Posterity."

All these authors are tapping virtually hidden springs. They desperately need to know of the existence of archival and manuscript sources for their studies. If your depository contains collections that may enhance our knowledge of the impact of the Civil War in these areas, I urge you to write me at the Civil War Centennial Commission, Washington 25, D. C. I shall be happy to send you a full list of the "Impact" authors, their studies, and their addresses; and all of them, I am confident, will be deeply grateful.

In 1966 we shall return to normal insofar as the study of the Civil War is concerned. Then the archivist, guardian of the Civil War's most precious treasures, will have the sole responsibility for maintaining the primary source materials for a conscientious study of the 1860's. Never will so many people then be seeking so much from so few. Do not fail us. You share, along with us, the inexorable obligation to prove that the past is truly prologue.

Wrongly Regarded As "Dead"

Routine protective work such as cleaning and fumigating against insect pests has continued on the old Consular archives throughout the year. Nothing, however, can be done about the worst natural and human enemies to which these valuable nineteenth century papers are still subjected until a building is provided where they can be properly protected against excessive humidity and unauthorized interference.

Nothing at all can be done until then to protect the more recent papers still in their departments or offices of origin. In these are stored basic sociological, demographic and scientific information on Zanzibar, laboriously accumulated for more than half a century, and essential data for the future good government of the territory. These files, often wrongly regarded as "dead" by the offices that produced them, are in many cases being kept in conditions in which they cannot be expected to survive, and are nearly always subject to the careless, if not brutal, handling of junior clerks and office boys. In some cases, exposed to rain from leaking roofs or badly fitting window shutters, or piled on floors and exposed to termites and dirt, they are rapidly disintegrating. At best their present conditions of storage will mean a vastly increased effort (and therefore expense) when the time comes to service them for preservation. Much will be past preserving.

— C. H. THOMPSON, *Annual Report of the Government Archives and Museum [Zanzibar Protectorate] for the Year 1961*, p. 3 (Zanzibar, 1962).