This book is the first omnibus history of the literature of the American Civil War, the deadliest conflict in U.S. history. *A History of American Civil War Literature* examines the way the war has been remembered and rewritten over time. This history incorporates new directions in Civil War historiography and cultural studies while giving equal attention to writings from both the northern and the southern states. Written by leading scholars in the field, this book works to redefine the boundaries of American Civil War literature while posing a fundamental question: Why does this 150-year-old conflict continue to capture the American imagination?

A HISTORY OF AMERICAN CIVIL WAR LITERATURE

EDITED BY

COLEMAN HUTCHISON

University of Texas, Austin
For Kathleen Diffl ey,
Dean of Civil War Literary Studies
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There can be little doubt about ongoing scholarly and popular interest in the American Civil War. More than 150 years after Appomattox, readers throughout the Anglophone world remain riveted by studies of and stories about this great internecine conflict. Indeed, estimates suggest that there have been 60,000 Civil War–related books or pamphlets published since 1865. That is a publication rate of a book a day, every day, since the cessation of hostilities. As with the “founding fathers” and Shakespeare, there is a robust publishing industry at work here, one that ensures that the Civil War is never far from mind.

Not surprisingly, then, literary representations of the war are an obsession for critics and lay readers alike. For instance, the Civil War poetry of Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, and Herman Melville are mainstays in high school and college curricula, while postwar narratives such as Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* (1936), and Shelby Foote’s *The Civil War: A Narrative* (1958–1974) prove “steady sellers” decade after decade. This is to say nothing of contemporary writers like Geraldine Brooks, E.L. Doctorow, and Natasha Trethewey, who continue to produce new literature about the war well into the twenty-first century.

In response to this seemingly ceaseless literary boom, scholars from a number of disciplines—English, history, American studies, and southern studies, to name a few—have produced a lively and at times contentious critical conversation about that literature. Yet, despite perpetual interest in literary representations of the conflict, this volume is the first omnibus history of the literature of the American Civil War. It also provides an uncommon opportunity to redefine the boundaries of that literature and rethink its place in American culture.

The twenty-two essays that follow make at least three key contributions to the current scholarship. First, rather than simply restate the age-old consensus about the American Civil War and its literature, this volume’s
essays take account of new directions in Civil War historiography and cultural studies. For instance, several of the essays emphasize the transnational and transatlantic aspects of this purported “war between brothers.” By emphasizing the ways that the conflict implicated nations other than or in addition to the United and Confederate States, the volume expands the mental map on which the American Civil War is played out. Too often this bloody struggle has been read in provincial terms, as a mostly domestic dispute in a “house divided.” But as writers like Don H. Doyle, Amanda Foreman, Howard Jones, Paul Quigley, Peter Rawlings, and Kathleen Diffl ey have shown, at any number of moments the American Civil War threatened to become an international conflict, one into which Mexico, France, England, and others might well have been drawn.

Similarly, *A History of American Civil War Literature* embodies an emergent fascination with Civil War memory – that is, how the war has been remembered over time – which became a hot topic following the publication of David W. Blight’s magisterial *Race and Reunion* (2001). Enlivened by theories of collective or cultural memory, a new generation of historians have turned their attention to the sometimes vexed and always muddy relations between history and memory. This has resulted in exciting new work on the memory of specific Civil War events or people; reburial efforts, monuments, and statuary; memorial holidays and reenactment culture. Needless to say, literature has played an outsized role in these reconstructions of Civil War memory. After all, the convergence of history and memory is the subject of a great deal of literature, as the subsequent chapters on realism, postwar memoir, Mark Twain, William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, and Natasha Trethewey argue.

The second key contribution of *A History of American Civil War Literature* involves its representation of southern literary cultures. Put simply, southern literature has gotten short shrift in previous works of literary history. Take, for example, the three best studies of Civil War literature in the past half century: Edmund Wilson’s *Patriotic Gore* (1962), Daniel Aaron’s *The Unwritten War* (1973), and Randall Fuller’s *From Battlefields Rising* (2011), all of which give disproportionate attention to northern writers. (Another classic study, George M. Frederickson’s *The Inner Civil War* [1965], betrays its commitments in its subtitle: “Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union.”) Such critical neglect is in keeping with a commonplace assumption about the paucity of Confederate literature and a general dubiousness about the strength of southern nationalism.

Yet recent studies by Gary Gallagher, Anne Sarah Rubin, Michael T. Bernath, and Coleman Hutchison, among others, refute that paucity
and confirm the strength of Confederate cultural nationalism. Indeed, the relative success of Confederate cultural nationalists to produce a “native literature” is, Bernath notes, “startling, almost unbelievable,” particularly in light of the various scarcities and shortages they faced (152). Thus, while one must acknowledge Wilson, Aaron, and Fuller’s respective, prodigious achievements, it is time to look again at the literature produced in the South before, during, and after the war. Moreover, it is time to tell a complete story about how literature helped shape the coming of the war, its outcome and its memory, on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line. To this end, the present volume shuttles back and forth between the North and the South, striving to find balance between Union and Confederate texts. Indeed, of the ten figures treated in Part III, five were or are self-described southerners.

The two tenses in the previous sentence signal the final key contribution of A History of American Civil War Literature: it employs a capacious definition of “American Civil War Literature.” Although the Civil War era is the primary focus of this history, it also considers antebellum contexts and postbellum genres. More to the point, while the first seven figures treated in Part III lived through the Civil War, the final three, William Faulkner (1897–1962), Robert Penn Warren (1905–1989), and Natasha Trethewey (1966–), experienced the conflict from an increasing historical distance. Yet these twentieth- and twenty-first-century writers also produced “Civil War literature.” Indeed, Absalom, Absalom! (1936), The Legacy of the Civil War (1961), and Native Guard (2006) remain three of the most urgent meditations on the ongoing relevance of the war. Thus, through its expanded historical scope, this volume brings us back to those 60,000 books or pamphlets. It also begins to answer one of the most perplexing questions in Civil War studies: Why does this 150-year-old conflict continue to capture the imagination?

The tripartite structure of A History of American Civil War Literature allows readers multiple ways to approach to that question. Rather than adhere to a strict chronological order – antebellum, bellum, postbellum – the essays are arranged under the categories “Contexts,” “Genres,” and “Figures.” This organization encourages readers to see connections among the individual essays and to consider issues of historical contingency, literary form, and author function. Part I draws on an older, more literary definition of the word context: “the parts which immediately precede or follow any particular passage or ‘text’ and determine its meaning.” While the essays included in Part I address the periods that immediately preceded and followed the American Civil War, their primary interest is in
seeing how those periods helped determine the meanings of the conflict. This cluster of essays reveals, for instance, antebellum tensions between abolitionist and secessionist print cultures, as well as stark differences between northern and southern publishing industries. Similarly, the cluster also weighs the literary legacies of the war, emphasizing the profound effect the conflict had on several generations of writers, both foreign and domestic.

Part II acknowledges the importance of genre to nineteenth-century conceptions of the literary. In canvassing a far-from-exhaustive list of genres, these essays limn the variety of modes through which the Civil War has been represented. Taken together, the essays also intimate the multiple audiences addressed by that literature. As suggested by the chapters on popular poetry and song, children's literature, and diaries, Civil War literature often troubled traditional hierarchies of race, class, and gender. Thus, genre emerges from this cluster as a powerful interpretive tool, one that helps us make sense of the diverse and diffuse cultural work undertaken by these literary texts.

Part III, with its litany of “Figures,” seems like the most traditional of the three sections. (In fact, this portion of the volume is reminiscent of Wilson's *Patriotic Gore* and Aaron's *The Unwritten War,* both of which are organized by literary figures.) However, the essays in this section distinguish themselves with the scope of their inquiries. Nearly all of these figures had or have had long writing careers. This fact allows contributors to gauge how literary projects change in relation to cataclysmic historical events (as in the essays on Walt Whitman and Herman Melville) and what happens when writers revisit such events again and again throughout their lives (as in the essays on Mary Boykin Chesnut, William Faulkner, and Robert Penn Warren).

That sort of recurrence – a nearly compulsive returning to the events of 1861–1865 – is, finally, a defining characteristic of the literature and culture of the United States more broadly. Literary representations of the deadliest war in U.S. history have helped several generations of readers define American identity and interrogate American ideals. Civil War literature has also served to remind readers how far the country has come since the abolition of slavery – and how much work there is left to do. More urgently, the literature of the American Civil seems to speak to something fundamental in generation after generation of readers, via an elusive, humanistic, and eventually affective appeal. Robert Penn Warren surely had that appeal in mind when he wrote in the first year of the Civil War Centennial that
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The Civil War is our only “felt” history – history lived in the national imagination. This is not to say that the War is always, and by all men, felt in the same way. Quite the contrary. But this fact is an index to the very complexity, depth, and fundamental significance of the event. It is an overwhelming and vital image of human and national experience.

The following pages show just how important literature has been to the representation of that image. They also suggest that literature will continue to shape the ways readers think and feel about the American Civil War for several generations to come.

Notes


Preface


Acknowledgments

My first thanks go to Ray Ryan, Caitlin Gallagher, and the team at Cambridge University Press for their vision and forbearance. I also want to acknowledge the painstaking work of my editorial assistant, Hannah V. Harrison. Trinity College’s Watkinson Library and The New-York Historical Society generously allowed us to reproduce images from their collections. The latter permission was for an image of two cows grazing near Grand Central Dépôt – an unexpected illustration for a history of the literature of the American Civil War. Yet if one knows the author of the essay in which said image appears, then the cows are hardly a surprise. Kathleen Diffl ey has spent her career getting us to think about the Civil War in unusual and arresting ways. She has also been a steadfast supporter of at least two generations of Civil War literary historians. Her deft scholarship, collegial warmth, and administrative acumen certainly earn her the title “Dean of Civil War Literary Studies.” As she might say, I am pleased as punch to dedicate this volume to her.