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Bloody Promenade

Reflections on a Civil War Battle

By Stephen Cushman

University Press of Virginia, 1999

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Reviewed by **William L. Barney**, professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and co-author of *The American Journey*, from Prentice Hall, 1997. He is currently completing the *Young Oxford Companion to the Civil War*.

Like a new shoe of the correct size that initially seems to fit awkwardly because of its unusual design, Stephen Cushman's *Bloody Promenade* requires patience on the part of the reader before its virtues become apparent. What at first seems to be a series of rambling, disjointed musings soon builds into a provocative, multi-

layered meditation on that “particularly awful moment in the American Civil war” marked by the Battle of the Wilderness in central Virginia on May 5 and 6, 1864.

Cushman takes his title from Walt Whitman’s brief reference to the battle as “the bloody promenade of the Wilderness” in his *Memoranda during the War* (1875). Whatever Whitman’s purpose in invoking the imagery of a leisurely walk undertaken for pleasure to characterize a battle that resulted in 26,000 casualties, Cushman draws on this imagery as he walks the reader back and forth through time in an exploration of the verbal and visual representations of the battle.

He begins with the signs on Route 20 near his home in Virginia that constantly remind him that he is in the vicinity of the Wilderness battlefield. These signs are also near the former home of Katherine Couse, a New Jersey native who had moved to Virginia before the war. Trapped in the midst of some of the heaviest fighting of the battle, Couse wrote on May 6 that “it is soul sickening to listen to the continual crack of small arms, then the loud resounding cannon, shells whizzing, balls whistling, soldiers yelling and hollouring as they rush on. Oh! God human beings killing each other. This wicked war will it never come to an end.”

For Cushman, the raw emotion and horror-provoking sense of immediacy of Couse’s first-hand account anchors one end of a spectrum of verbal representations of the battle. Before returning to this theme, one that dominates the middle sections of his narrative, he first recollects how a photograph in *The American Heritage Picture History of the Civil War* (1960) sparked his interest in the war as a young boy. He surmises that he was not alone, that for most contemporary Americans “the flood of Civil War images, which continues to rise and shows no sign of cresting, is not the effect of interest in the war but is itself the cause.” He then offers some shrewd observations on the popularity of the term “buff” used to designate Civil War enthusiasts. The term, denoting as it does both a specialized interest and an air of harmless eccentricity, came into idiomatic use after the centennial years of the 1960s only because the ghastly realities of the war had safely receded into the past. Hence, in a way that would have been unthinkable for those with personal experiences or memories of the conflict, the war could serve as a source of amusement and trivialization.

Much of the interest in the war has spilled over into a search for a Civil War ancestor or an urge to take part in a battlefield reenactment. Cushman succumbed to both temptations. Before giving up on a search that was ever expanding, he discovered ten Civil War ancestors, two of whom were killed, one in a Union uniform and the other in a Confederate. Reenactors—notes Cushman in an analogy drawn from the rituals of religion and the theater—entertain, commemorate, and teach. They also strive to lose themselves in the moment, to experience however fleetingly the sensory perceptions of the actual combatants. After taking part in a reenactment of the Battle of the Wilderness that attempted to recreate the en-

gement at Saunders's Field, Cushman "had the sense that I had gotten what I came for." Time had played tricks on him, especially when his ears were ringing from the sound of four thousand rifles and eighteen cannons firing. In the smoke, noise, and confusion he had a brief sense of how disorienting would have been the booming of the seven to eight times that number of rifles and cannon on the afternoon of May 5, 1864.

In chapter six, "Eyewitness," Cushman begins an extended analysis of how each different kind of writing yields its own insights into how to recreate an event such as the Battle of the Wilderness. The great value of an eyewitness account—its unvarnished emotion and immediacy—comes at a price. The knowledge available to a participant in an event, such as a soldier in the Wilderness battles, is necessarily incomplete. It amounts to what Cushman aptly calls prehistory, "an unsifted, unabsorbed, untamed piece of ongoing presence." Not until reports have been compiled and documents studied can a story be told or a history written that places individual actions in a coherent narrative structure.

The process of shaping the fluidity of the present into the rounded contours of history begins with newspaper accounts. As John Cowper Granberry, a Confederate chaplain, wrote his wife from the Wilderness, "I don't attempt to tell you news about the battle, because you will learn fuller details from the papers." Granberry's confidence was misplaced. The newspapers did provide more details on the battle than he could have been aware of, but their reports were so confused and contradictory that any reader would have been at a loss to know what actually happened. What readers with access to *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* or *Harper's Weekly* would have found most useful for understanding the battle were the striking visual images of such artists as Edwin Forbes and Alfred Wauld. The most famous and enduring image of the battle has remained Wauld's sketch, "Army of the Potomac—Our Wounded Escaping from the Fires in the Wilderness," that appeared in *Harper's Weekly* on June 4, 1864.

The fog of uncertainties and inaccuracies that shrouded wartime accounts of battles began to lift with the postwar publication of memoirs. These personal reminiscences, along with the appearance of massive compilations of official records, provided a seemingly objective basis from which the military events of the war could be sorted out and ordered. Indeed, the popularity of the generals' memoirs rested on the assumption that here were the authorities who had seen the big picture and could present it as it actually was. Yet, as Cushman shrewdly reminds us, "the Civil War memoir has led a double life, trying to function as both a witness to subjective individual experience and a servant to objective historical narrative. For this reason, the memoir occupies a middle ground between the eyewitness letter or diary, on the one hand, and a conventional historical narrative, on the other."

Memoirs are often more revealing of the workings of historical memory than

of the events being described. They are filled with *what ifs?* and subjective reconstructions of what could and should have happened. Memoirs can also convey an emotional sense of the past that can be grasped in no other way. Morris Schaff, an obscure Union ordinance officer, wrote *The Battle of the Wilderness* (1910), which for Cushman recreated better than any other historical record the unsettling foreboding of the dark, entangled woods that enveloped the soldiers caught up in the battle. As he narrated the fighting at Saunders's Field, Schaff commented: "It is the holding of the secrets of butchering happenings like these, and its air of surprised and wild curiosity in whosoever penetrates the solitude and breaks its grim, immeasurable silence, that gives the Wilderness, I think, its deep and evoking interest."

With the publication in 1928 of Union General John Gibbon's *Personal Recollections of the Civil War*, the cycle of Civil War memories had about run its course. These memoirs and the 128-volume *War of the Rebellion* (1880–1901) made possible the writing of the historical narratives of the war that we read today. In reviewing much of this literature, Cushman stresses that these books are indeed literature: narratives built around fictional conventions of plotting a story, analyzing information, telling anecdotes, and dramatizing events. The most popular histories, such as James McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom* (1988) and Shelby Foote's *The Civil War: A Narrative* (1958–1974), are comprehensive accounts that have little room for the Battle of the Wilderness, an indecisive encounter late in the war that piled up heavy casualties to which the reader had long since become inured. Any serious student of the battle would have to turn to a specialized study such as Gorton Rhea's *The Battle of the Wilderness* (1994) for any extended analysis or description of what happened.

In large part because so much historical writing rests upon retelling stories already told by others, fiction and poetry can often bring us closer to the unique particularity of an event in the past. The key question to ask of such work, Cushman insists, is "how does the fictional representation of what may have happened, with all its accuracies or inaccuracies, enlarge or diminish our sense of what actually happened?" His perceptive comments on a broad range of novels and poems that touch or focus upon combat experience in the Wilderness reveal just how the most creative of this literature can surpass nonfiction in jolting us into a fresh understanding of a story we thought we already knew.

Cushman ends on a wistful note. He wonders if Americans can safely assume that they will never again face an internal ordeal as terrible as the Civil War. He also notes that the Wilderness battlefield straddles one of the most rapidly growing counties in central Virginia and that the preservation of what's left of the site can by no means be taken for granted. Regardless of the fate of the battlefield, *Bloody Promenade* will stand as a poignant reminder of what we know and cannot know of the awful events that occurred there.