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THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE UNDER BRITISH SPOTLIGHTS



The idea that *The Red Badge of Courage* took off once it drew the attention of British readers and reviewers has been repeatedly set forth as a given in Crane scholarship.¹ Suffice it to say here that, although many of the critics, in particular, have been cited by eminent Craneans, the viewpoint of every last tiller of this myth has not yet been tracked down and recorded. Hopefully, what I offer below will succeed in bringing forth a few. Opinions regarding Crane's novel are to be found not in reviews qua reviews alone, but, often, in the literary news and gossip columns that peppered the pages of many newspapers and literary magazines. My study here is part bibliography, part analysis, ending with some general conclusions, all of which, I hope, will give an idea of the literary climate when *Red Badge* was a contemporary book. Understandably, many Americanists do not immediately think of exploring British newspapers or magazines for information about American authors. Moreover, many of these repositories have remained fairly inaccessible because the survival rate has been uncertain, as, for example, the ravages of bombing in Plymouth during WWII destroyed some runs of that region's newspapers. Moreover, in a time when many students are being trained away from such pursuits it is no wonder that many valuable items go begging.

British reviewers were not slow to set forth their ideas about *Red Badge*, in either its American or English editions. In *Stephen Crane: The Critical Heritage* Richard M. Weatherford observed that in England "the book caught on faster with the reading public [than it did with American readers] but did not last so well."² The ways in which *Red Badge* caught on varied, as is evident in the opinions registered by reviewers. I intend to

supply information concerning notices of Crane's novel that, so far as I am aware, have not previously been made available. R.W. Stallman's lists in *Stephen Crane: A Critical Bibliography* (1972) are far from exhaustive in their citations,³ and for some worthwhile British materials he furnishes no annotations either, unlike Kevin J. Hayes, who performs commendable service in marshaling and annotating reviews from the *Manchester Guardian*.⁴

Red Badge was printed and distributed in Great Britain by William Heinemann during late November 1895, although, according to Weatherford, it carried an 1896 date (6). The first British review he publishes is that by H.B. Marriott Watson in the *Pall Mall Gazette* for 26 November 1895, although a longer critique, which Stallman merely cites *sans* annotation, appeared in W.L. Courtney's "Books of the Day" column for London's *Daily Telegraph*. Courtney encompasses most of the characteristics that would attract attention elsewhere, and so we may profitably pause over his opinions. First, Courtney foregrounds the psychological portraiture of Henry, which is, he states, "analysed [sic] with microscopic fidelity."⁵ He adds: "The picture is weird and harsh because of the uncompromising truth with which it is delineated," thereby directing readers to consider the pictorial elements in *Red Badge*. These link with emotional substance in this novel comprised of "flying photographs, fragmentary sketches, not only of episodes, but of characteristic specimens of the soldier—mainly in his unheroic moods, when he betrays his points of weakness rather than of strength, his moments of agony rather than the fierce lust of battle" (7). As for stylistics, the book "is a crude little work from certain points of view, unduly protracted here and there, and written in a curiously staccato and spasmodic style . . . but it is full of undeniable power and of an unflinching sincerity which at once fascinates and repels" (7). Despite the power that Courtney discerns, and that many other British reviewers of *Red Badge* would likewise point out—an intensity, that is, that forbids putting down the book before one arrives at the last word—the emotions sustained by humans at the point of "extreme danger" are "almost too sacred and intimate to be disclosed with such pitiless accuracy" (7). Clearly, Courtney would not manage well, were he to read many of our own day's atrocities as set forth in the newspapers or, in what might be deemed a latter-day kind of Cranean pictorialism, on television

and theater screens. Courtney's teaming of Crane's realism with that of Kipling and Tolstoy (in *War and Peace*) would echo throughout many other British notices of *Red Badge*, just as that placement was deemed worthy of note by many Americans. Several years afterward, a reviewer in the "Chat about Books" section of London's *Daily Mail* (19 August 1898: 3), remarked that in introducing Heinemann's volume entitled *Pictures of War*, in which *Red Badge* and *The Little Regiment and other Stories* were included, George Wyndham stated how, in depicting war, Crane surpassed Tolstoy and Zola—high praise indeed for the young writer.⁶

British commentators elsewhere also honed in on elements of psychology, pictorialism, power, and style as well as the concept of the hero, featured in *Red Badge*. A long notice, "Mars Revealed," in the *St. James's Gazette* (7 December 1895: 5) picks up on all of these aspects of the novel, directing readers, first, toward the psychological realism in the "sternly minute portrayal of the constantly changing and recurring moods experienced by a regiment of raw recruits, and of the same moods reflected and emphasized in the mind of the imaginative Yankee youth who is in a very true sense the hero in spite of the fact that he runs away from the enemy." Henry as hero is motivated by "arguments and counter arguments" in his mind; this youth is ultimately "transformed into a man, though blind rage and annoyance rather than what we generally understand by courage is the force which inspires him." Next we are asked to take into account the

weird alarming noises of the battlefield, the colour and the smoke and the smell and the horror of it; the strange oaths and mutterings, the tears and panic and rage, the brutal lust for the blood of the men . . . all this and much more is brought home to one in a manner which is nothing less than amazing.

The notice concludes by emphasizing that *Red Badge* has unmistakable

excellence . . . as a work of art— not only for its matter, but for its style. Mr. Crane's language is as remarkable as his treatment of his subject. His

book abounds in graphic and original similes, and is marked throughout by the forcible use of bizarre epithets. The descriptions of battles which we get from our most talented war correspondents might, as a rule, be quite comfortably written in an arm-chair at home; Mr. Crane writes as if he had not only seen but felt each incident and emotion which he describes.

The "Books of the Day" reviewer in the *Liverpool Mercury* (1 January 1896: 7) did not dwell on Henry as unheroic hero, as the two preceding reviewers did, in its epitomizing of his emotional makeup:

The white-faced fear that seizes upon the recruit before his first battle, the berserker rage that succeeds it, the deadly explanation that comes when all is over; these are described with extraordinary power, and constitute the purpose and interest of the book.

London's *The Globe* (15 January 1896: 4) review, "Stories of Love and War," once again brings to the fore the pictorializing of Henry's psyche, commenting:

It is not a lovely picture, this, of a lad's body and soul, in the fight, on the march, in dread of running away, in dread of death, in unpremediated flight, in lying, cursing, callous desertion of the dying, fainting for fear, raging for blood, in savage firing for firing's sake after the enemy has departed, and the time for rest has come. Almost from minute to minute the lad is pursued, until the pondering, doubtful boy grows into the strong self-possessed, machine-like, unreflective animal.

Turning to Crane's expression, the reviewer finds that

his command of phrase and epithet is astonishing . . . except, indeed that we receive the impression that American officers have no variety in their con-

versation—it is all one big oath—and that the men endeavour to copy their officers at a respectful distance. It cannot be said that the writer of this little book seeks to disgust unnecessarily or to obtrude unsavory details. For his choice of subject he has, perhaps, justification.

Since the 1890s, like *Red Badge* itself, often seem to be a battleground, it is appropriate here to turn to “Books of the Day,” in the *Lady’s Pictorial* (4 April 1896:468), a magazine wholly committed to long-standing Victorian codes for proper feminine conduct, and notice its critique of Crane’s novel:

Personally, a book totally without the human interest, and that is positively bristling with fighting and horrible swearing, has no interest for me; but readers who are not upset by carnage and bad language—if there are any amongst our subscribers—will find much to admire.

Victorian women of the “Angel-in-the-House” school would also find distasteful this novel which, to quote Dickens’s “immortal Miss Squeers”—as the *Lady’s Pictorial* did—was “steeped in goar.” One wonders how the reviewer might have responded to Vance Thompson’s idea, expressed in the 7 August *New York Commercial Advertiser*, that “it is not amiss to say that Mr. Crane writes like a woman—a woman Amazonic, unimammiferous, to be sure—rather than a man.”⁷ The writer in the *Lady’s Pictorial* was consistent, however; each successive work by Crane brought forth antagonistic reactions, revealing that the ladies of the time were not amused by the young American’s realism in matters of character, theme, and language. Several years later, in considering *The Open Boat* volume, the *Lady’s Pictorial* (“Books of the Day,” 8 October 1898: 567-68) was still harping on the same string: arguing, for example, that comparisons of Crane with Kipling are useless—the latter never revels in the “gruesome and horrible; whereas Mr. Crane is always at his best when he is wallowing in blood and scattering oaths broadcast over his pages.”

A somewhat different, if no more positive, angle of approach was adopted by *The Clarion* (“Bookland,” 2 May 1896:

138), a socialist weekly in London, as it noticed *Red Badge*, opening with the comment:

Already the volume of criticism poured out on him is vast enough to engulf his works. And curious reading that criticism is; for a short time ago Mr. Crane's writings were described with the following choice critical epithets: *Idiocy, drivel, bombast, rot, non-sense, puerility, untruth, garbage, hamfat, funny, absurd, childish, drunken, besotted, obscure, opium-laden, blasphemous, indecent, fustian, rant, bassoon-poetry, swell-head stuff, bluster, balderdash, windy, turgid, stupid, pompous, gasconade, gas-house ballads.* Now we are told that the writer of this *garbage* and *hamfat* has by one small book redeemed the latter end of the nineteenth century from literary disgrace; [and] that he is a genius.

Quoting Harold Trader's hyperbolic praise in the *New York Times*—that until Crane presented it in *Red Badge*, "the actual truth about a battle has never been guessed before"—the *Clarion* critic concludes that this laudation is "tallish," and that in fact there were other novels, such as Erkmann-Chatrian's *The Conscript*, which were equally plausible, or moreso, in depicting war.

More sympathetic, though still tempered in its response, Scotland's *North British Daily Mail* ("Literature," 3 February 1896: 2) noted, first, the brevity, and then concentrated on the pictorial techniques in *Red Badge*, which, as in other commentary, were bracketed with realistic delineation of Henry's psychology:

Very vivid, very sensational too in one sense, are these battle-pictures, but the novelty and realistic power of them lies in their revelation of the changing moods, the confusion of mind, the sickening fear, the frantic bravery, through all of which this individual soldier passes.

As for the war background overall, Crane "paints minutely the very ugly individual facts that go to make up a great battle." The reviewer does question the effectiveness of characterization in

Henry: "for a man half dazed, as the hero is for a large portion of the time, he sees too much perhaps and is too conscious of too many changes of feeling." Had this critic a reading knowledge of Ford, Woolf, Joyce, Faulkner, Heller, Pynchon, and others for whom Crane's work paved the way, this opinion might not have been offered.

Just as tempered is the reaction in *The Graphic* ("Two Historical Novels," 11 August 1896: 442),⁸ which admires the

minutely detailed study, taken moment by moment, of all the sensations and experiences of a recruit before and during his first battle. It is also the photography of a battle as seen by that recruit's eyes and those only. And it is also, apart from a creaking and cumbrous style of writing, marvelously well done; it is realism of an exceedingly skillful kind.

The "picture" presented to readers "looks very much like truth, if only because it is so little like ordinary fiction, and still less like history," that cognate which, for many readers of fiction, had to be present to give a novel credibility. Crane is admired for his ability to limn Henry's mind without having had himself any battle experience.

The *Leeds Mercury*, looking back over the fiction produced during 1896 ("The Fiction of the Year," 26 December 1896: 4), opined that rumors of war at the beginning of the year sent readers after *Red Badge*, a "really clever and remarkable book," just as it may have sent them in quest of romance fiction by writers like Doyle, Weyman, Hope, Quiller Couch or Parker—along with a lament for the passing of Stevenson, the "one great master" of romance.

A natural aftermath of such information as is presented above is the inevitable comparison of Crane's subsequent publications with *Red Badge*. That by Spencer Leigh Hughes, writing as "Sub Rosa" in *The Gentlewoman*, sums up the situation adroitly:

One of those revelations of humanity, before which we fall in admiration, is "*Red Badge of Courage*," and its author, Mr. Stephen Crane, found himself, on this side of the Atlantic at least, a man of fame

shortly after its publication.⁹ Consequently any later works from his pen are looked for with a curiosity that is most flattering.

George's Mother, for example, does not surpass, but it does not fall below the artistic level established in the earlier novel. Typically, it presents a "study of a young man"; that is, this book, like *Red Badge*, is psychological in its thrust. Other commentators addressed comparative issues of pictorial techniques, handling of language, and characterization. For example, reviewing *The Little Regiment*, the *London Morning Post* (4 March 1897: 2) placed the stories in that volume on a par with Crane's achievement in *Red Badge*—unlike the *Manchester Guardian* ("Novels," 23 February 1897: 4), included in Hayes' compilation, which found *The Little Regiment* an artistic advance over the earlier book. Further acclaim sounds in yet another London's *Daily Mail* "Gossip about Books" column (24 April 1900: 3), where we read that *Red Badge* "contains the most vivid description of fighting, and the psychology of fighting, in the American Civil War that exists."

What appears in the foregoing remarks is representative of British outlook of *Red Badge*. Crane's psychological realism would have appealed greatly to that generation of fiction readers, who found it all the more hard-hitting because the novel was brief. This was the time, after all, when miniaturizing tendencies subsumed mammoth proportions in many of the arts. Likewise Crane's handling of battle scenes was refreshing to readers who had been treated to multi-volume presentations of a panoramic sweep in writers like Tolstoy. Pictorial elements in *Red Badge* would also have touched another responsive chord in this era of generic collapses, when attempts were made to merge painting, literature, music, and the drama, witness Stanley V. Makower's much-noticed Keynotes Series novel, *The Mirror of Music*, or Aubrey Beardsley's graphics, or Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a novel, as "weird" in its own way as *Red Badge* was repeatedly said to be. Perhaps this attitude mirrors Walter Pater's ideas about beauty and strangeness, which has in turn Poe's doctrines in its backgrounds. The fiction of George Egerton, Ella D'Arcy, Hubert Crackanthorpe and others of their school was often designated poetic prose and word-painting, just as *Red Badge* was, a plausible outcome, we might realize, from the earlier Pre-

Raphaelite movement, and from the contemporaneous concern with artistic aspects in illustrations for books. Crane's language in *Red Badge*, as well as in others of his works, was also singled out as a notable feature again and again. What was considered his American English, and particularly its colloquialisms and profanities, was here found artistic, there execrable, depending on the mindset of the commentator. One might well remember, too, another work from this period in which terse expression coalesced with zesty irony in regard to the military life and its impact upon the psychology of a greenhorn country youth, A.E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*, which appeared the year after *Red Badge*. Could Crane's novel have offered inspiration to Housman as he created many of his lyrics during 1896? Crane did remain among Housman's favorites in fiction-writers, we know.¹⁰ *A Shropshire Lad*, like *Red Badge*, is a work of intriguingly shifting perspectives, a veritable kaleidoscope in terms of scenic and emotional shifts. Crane's language also invited repeated analysis by the British, whose attentiveness to American English, especially in its colloquial and profane varieties, was strong. Crane's novel doubtless seemed to many British readers in the 1890s imbued with an experimentalness akin to what many writers on their own soil were engaging. Whether on planes of admiration or castigation, *The Red Badge of Courage* proved to be compelling to the British press. My findings constitute but the veriest tip of an iceberg as regards the British viewpoints on the status of Crane's novel. ☺

NOTES

1. To cite but two representative examples, I offer R.W. Stallman and Christopher Benfey. *The Double Life of Stephen Crane*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992: 220. Some information not to be missed in this connection, however, appears in *Stephen Crane: The Critical Heritage*, Richard M. Weatherford, ed. (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 6. Weatherford demonstrates that "the book caught on faster [in England], but did not last so well."

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2. Richard M. Weatherford, ed. *Stephen Crane: The Critical Heritage* (London, Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 6. Subsequent references to this text are parenthetical.

3. R.W. Stallman, *Stephen Crane: A Critical Bibliography* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1972).

4. Kevin J. Hayes, "Crane Reviews in the *Manchester Guardian*," *Stephen Crane Studies* 2. 2 (Fall 1993): 38-49.

5. W.L. Courtney, "Books of the Day," *Daily Telegraph* (29 November 1895): 7. Subsequent references to this text are parenthetical.

6. When feasibly possible, full citations of the anonymous reviews are in the main text.

7. Stanley Wertheim and Paul Sorrentino, *The Crane Log: A Documentary Life of Stephen Crane, 1871-1900* (New York: G.K. Hall, 1994), 199.

8. Stallman cites 11 April: 444, without notation.

9. Sub Rosa (Spencer Leigh Hughes), "Under Cover," *The Gentleman* (8 August 1896): 192.

10. Grant Richards, *Housman: 1897-1936* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1942), 337.