

COMMENTARY BY THOMAS C. WARE

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*Fiction Still Fights the Civil War: "It  
Ain't Over Though It's Over"*

**I**T SHOULD HAVE COME AS NO SURPRISE to students of the modern novel—and of the US Civil War—that one of the best-selling and most honored books published in this country within the last few years has been E. L. Doctorow's novel about the Civil War—*The March*—a finalist for the National Book Award for fiction, and winner of the prestigious PEN/Faulkner Foundation Award for 2005. As described by one official judge, this narrative "sweeps us up into the sixty-thousand troop force that was General Sherman's march through Georgia and the Carolinas . . . [laying] bare not only Sherman's momentous trek through the south, but the trek into our own dusty and blood-filled past, the smoke of gun barrels and burned homes rising through the trees where the hope for peace and redemption endures."<sup>1</sup>

Quite a vivid and praising comment: but as we will see, despite the acknowledged beauty and power of its narration and its technical skill, the very fact that the book concerns the Civil War—further, that it will probably be made into a popular motion picture—opens it to certain kinds of criticism perhaps not addressed to other genres of fiction. Doctorow was quoted as stating that the "germ" of the idea came to him two decades ago while reading a soldier's-eye view of Sherman's campaign edited by a historian, discovering in the process that this account of the extended march had potential (he used the word "armature") to become a novel—and concluding that this military operation "had an identity apart from everything else in the Civil War."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in perspective, when one considers that Sherman had held these legions together for months on end, crossing hundreds of miles on foot and on horseback, through widely differing landscapes and at times punishing

weather, and feeding on the land even as he scorched it, the success of his endeavor ranks with those of Genghis Khan or Napoleon at his most effective.

That entire enterprise, Doctorow observed, became “an act of self-destruction [which] cuts to the heart of everything we are as a country”; and though he was in the process of writing the novel even as the United States went to war in Iraq—a war he opposed—he indicated that he had no intention of drawing contemporary parallels.<sup>3</sup> If so, one may well wonder about his reasons for even bringing up that subject. Perhaps he did protest too much.

In the same interview, Doctorow expressed irritation at being generally referred to as a “historical” novelist, saying that he did not like any “modification” of the word novelist: and this, despite his having written a number of fictional works incorporating research into historical detail from early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as *Ragtime*, *World’s Fair*, *Billy Bathgate*, and *The Book of Daniel*. Some have defined him as a “mythologist” or even a writer of “nostalgia.” Whatever term is appropriate, he certainly employed formulas and devices that originated with such authors of classical historical novels as Sir Walter Scott and William Thackeray: inserting fictional characters into episodes which actually occurred, physically juxtaposing them next to people who actually lived in a given time—General Sherman, for example, speaking to characters created by the author; or having an imagined low-life opportunist becoming involved in an attempted assassination of Sherman himself. In short, Doctorow, like so many before him, incorporated detailed knowledge of history as a means of producing an independent creation and in the process offering an interpretation of the Civil War.

Back in 1957, on the eve of the centennial celebration of the Civil War, a scholar named Robert A. Lively, after exploring a large group of novels which exhibited many of these same formal patterns, published an ambitious critical study entitled *Fiction Fights the Civil War*, an analytic survey of how the historical novel as genre became a literary battleground for examining and judging the issues, events, and personalities involved in that conflict. Some of the very motivation for the war, Lively notes at one point, lay in the bitter simplification of language, of the contemptuous terms each side used to label what they saw as the extremists on the other: “The fanatics of Boston” as opposed to “the hotheads of South Carolina”<sup>4</sup>—with little possibility of compromise: hence warfare.

Almost needless to state, that battle continues with no end in sight but seeming to be getting ever more sophisticated, if one may judge from the number of novels, films, and television specials appearing in recent years. Lively’s subtitle—*An Unfinished Chapter in the Literary History of the American People*—suggests that even from the perspective of the late 1950’s, he could foresee the attraction that this body of material would exhibit for generations to come. And we may guess that a century or two from today this vast reservoir of history and imaginative re-creation

might coalesce into the stuff of epic, essentially defining and memorializing an entire culture.

In his introduction, Professor Lively informs us that for his task, he examined some five hundred and twelve novels in this category—not, as he said “an altogether serious task, nor, for that matter, a very safe one”<sup>5</sup> He stresses the word “examined” rather than “read,” observing that “the mass of Civil War novels flows out in that sluggish stream . . . described as ‘sub-literary’<sup>6</sup>: which clearly implies that the quality of most of these narratives may have made the entire project seem at moments hardly worth the effort. Ironically, a point he makes forcefully in this opening section is that he did not intend to disparage any of these texts, rather finding in them evidence of what he terms “persistent sectional traditions”(i. e., North and South and middleground)—evidence also to support “practically any conclusion which may be drawn from study of the war. I have tried, “he indicated, ”to see them whole and have sought, in this process, to illustrate their variety, their general tone, and their reliability as sources of knowledge about the conflict.”<sup>7</sup>

Of those hundreds considered, he estimated “no more than a score have added much value to the nation’s literature.”<sup>8</sup> In this vein he does provide two lists, one a selection of only fifteen of those he terms “the best,” among them Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*, William Faulkner’s *The Unvanquished*, and Ross Lockridge’s *Raintree County*. On the other hand, Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind* he relegates to the list of thirty “Other Representative” novels, yet he asserts, correctly I think, that “southern traditions of the Civil War have been more firmly fixed in the American consciousness” by [this best-seller] than by any work of history or sociology or biography.<sup>9</sup> His essential arguments were first, that the mass of these novels, many of them “costume” or “period” romances, added little to our understanding of the war; and second, that among the more serious ones, neither the North nor the South has “monopolized” these fictional battlegrounds. To reinforce this judgment, he offered graphs to illustrate where 231 of the authors were born and whether their tendencies were pro-North or pro-South. The numbers were about even, or one might say, inconclusive, as he notes:

Had unanimous acceptance of any point of view been permanently reached, then the intellectual conflict maintained in good war novels would have long since been resolved. The Civil War would not exist, as it does today, as an institution of American fiction.<sup>10</sup>

The very existence of these specific five hundred plus novels constitutes a unique historical anecdote, owing to a whimsical wager by an undergraduate at Yale University in the summer of 1937, Richard Wilmer, Jr., who, believing that literally

hundreds of such novels existed, but a classmate fifty-cents that he could prove it. Setting out to purchase only first editions, none to cost more than \$1.50, in effect he drove up the prices when his mimeographed lists made the rounds of booksellers—and he finally had to pay as much as \$4.00 for one of them. In 1942, when he joined the US Navy, he had to abandon the pursuit; and after the war, in 1946, he gave the collection to the University of North Carolina Library, where later the young Mr. Lively began his graduate studies in history—and became the first to delve into the Wilmer collection, which had been continued by a librarian at UNC.

One of the major points Lively advanced that may well account for Doctorow's aversion to the label "historical novelist" is that modern writers in this category—Lively puts the birth of this period in the mid 1920's—appear to be "conscious of the threat to the accuracy of their work posed by the addition of too much of the present"<sup>11</sup>—which is to say that too much historical detail imposes a heavy burden on both reader and novelist, tending to minimize the imagination and artistry of the author—as well as his value as an entertainer; and too much contemporary bias undermines the aesthetic appeal of the work. As Lively states, "The virtue of fiction's report lies in the revelation of large events through a record of small, intimate events. Historical generalizations often sound hollow in the mouths of amateurs; the successful novelist cuts his canvas to the size of his talent and knowledge."<sup>12</sup>

Doctorow is no amateur. Although his grasp of the logistical and medical details of this panoramic undertaking is firm, grounded in his own deep research, with deference to a few experts mentioned at the end of his novel, "Sherman's March" becomes the vehicle (heavily metaphoric) by which he conveys inner vignettes of a range of characters, only a few of whom may be seen as specifically "historic" but certainly iconic in what each represents. Among the more prominent are Colonel Wrede Sartorius, a skilled medical officer, born and educated in Germany, horrified by the barbarous practices of most battlefield surgery and by the state of American medical science in general. To Emily Thompson, dispossessed member of a distinguished Southern family, well-educated but willingly pressed into service as a field nurse, Sartorius seemed "like some god trying to staunch the flow of human disaster."<sup>13</sup> Hopelessly attracted to him, she leaves the march in Savannah because of his absence of "gallantry," which is to say he finds medicine more appealing than her charms. Late in the novel, because of his reputation, Sartorius is invited by Lincoln personally to become Surgeon General—and is present at the president's deathbed.

Next, Pearl: a beautiful fair-skinned fifteen-year old girl, an emblem of Southern miscegenation, begotten by her white owner on one of his slaves. Despised by her father, she escapes being sold and for a time passes as Sherman's drummer boy—later taking care of her former mistress, gone daft after the death of her husband.

In many ways Pearl becomes a vanguard of Negro feminism. Although illiterate, she demonstrates rare talents as a compassionate nurse, with practical instincts beyond her years. One admirer thinks that she had “some royal African blood” in her veins.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately her future seems assured with a young Union soldier, who wishes to marry her and finance her medical education.

Also prominent is the fleshed-out role of one of Sherman’s actual officers, Judson “Kil” Kilpatrick, an epitome of the Union rogue officer. A hump-backed cavalry general in charge of the brutal foraging that is a staple of the march, notorious for his “relish for battle,”<sup>15</sup> for his wild partying and sensuality, and for the ruthless accumulation of wealth he has confiscated, he was despised by Sherman, who nevertheless realized his value to the overall success of the campaign. At several points Kilpatrick is lucky to escape alive from the recklessness of his behavior—and he hates to see the war end.

Perhaps the most versatile use of all of Doctorow’s minor creations is a pair of misfits, Arly and Will, who as deserters from the Confederate ranks seem at first to serve as standard comic relief types—but whose bumbling exploits turn deadly as they don Union uniforms and slip in and out of the medical unit as the march proceeds. Will is killed, but Arly, as a devious fatalist, justifying to himself the ways of man to God, and believing that he has some mighty purpose to accomplish, finds himself in a position to assassinate Sherman, fails, and is executed.

As the swirling, dusty cloud of the Union Army floats across the landscape, picking up all manner of human refugees in its wake—white Union sympathizers, freed black slaves, prisoners of war—it seems to represent a panorama of human history itself, a massive migration, marching in a vast circle. But to one representative group of ex-slaves, left abandoned at a plantation big house by their former “Massah and Mistress,” this phenomenon means one word: “deliverance.”

And, as they watched, the brown cloud took on a reddish cast:

[moving] forward, thin as a hatchet blade in front and then widening like the furrow from the plow. . . . It was not fearsomely heaven-made, like thunder or lightning or howling wind, but something felt through their feet, a resonance, as if the earth was humming. Then, carried on a gust of wind, the sound became for moments a rhythmic tromp that relieved them as the human reason for the great cloud of dust. . . . they heard the voices of living men shouting, finally. And the lowing of cattle. And the creaking of wheels. But they saw nothing. . . . The symphonious clamor was everywhere . . . it was the great processional of the Union armies, but of no more substance than an army of ghosts.<sup>16</sup>

In the center rides Sherman himself, not on a white stallion but on something akin to a pony. Scruffy in appearance, modest in his personal demands, he embodies the skilled and efficient military leader, fully committed to his task of making war with all of its dreadful consequences. In all, we see him as a highly complex and contradictory human being, referred to by his troops as “Uncle Billy.” Doctorow intensifies and deepens these qualities by isolating him intermittently with brooding soliloquies, which, though at moments become somewhat trite, are almost worthy of Hamlet. We learn that he is nonetheless vain about his fame and victories, yet deeply troubled by the destruction and carnage of war, especially the deaths of so many young men—troubled also about the very meaning of life itself, and unnerved by how casually death occurs. Drinking brandy more than he eats, he is also impatient with the many aspects of “governance” involved in the administrative duties of holding this campaign together. And at the apex of his success, the almost bloodless capture of Savannah, he scans the newspapers fresh in from Ohio, and suddenly encounters the notice that his six-month-old son had died of croup. This device of ironic anticlimax, incidentally, appears frequently in the novel, including the sudden loss of Sherman’s own sense of purpose at the news from Appomattox, as if war alone had given meaning to his existence.

I think of it now, God help me with longing . . . how it made every field and swamp and river and road into something of moral consequence, whereas now, as the march dissolves so does the meaning, the army strewing itself into the isolated intentions of diffuse private life and the terrain thereby left blank and also diffuse. . . .<sup>17</sup>

One reviewer has observed that *The March* “differs from other Civil War novels in that it is not anchored to a particular place.”<sup>18</sup> Almost any generalization along these lines, however, would sweep much too widely, although the very fluidity of Doctorow’s technique has in fact drawn as much praise as the characterizations. As Lively has observed, however, commentary on this genre “cannot be limited to novels assembled according to a standard critical formula.”<sup>19</sup> *Raintree County*, for example, as a novel about the Civil War, actually takes place in real time on a single day in Indiana; and we may recognize that the device of having extraordinarily diverse individuals grouped together on a journey is an ancient trope.

Perhaps a more valid approach to establishing distinction among novels in this category may be to seek and isolate the principal theme; that is, the dominating idea or thesis of the work. Professor Lively attempted to separate within his control group some major themes, although he was not determinate in this exercise. “I have shuffled and redealt my deck of ‘theme’ cards many times,” he states, “and the

resulting hands in this historical game are rarely the same.”<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, he does identify about ten such themes, among them the perspectives on slavery and Negro life, “divided kinsmen and neighbors,” “reconciliation and reunion,” “North-South love,” “northern Copperheads,” “sentimental patriotism,” “boy soldiers,” and “campaign histories,” such as the many accounts of Gettysburg and Antietam.

To some degree *The March* could be placed in this latter group, but not a history as such, in that it subsumes the actual details of military encounters and chronology of events to the overall human drama and the horror produced by these powerful cultural forces in confrontation. To choose one episode to demonstrate the polished complexity of Doctorow’s overall treatment, I select this pivotal event, presented through the eyes of a British journalist, Hugh Pryce, covering the war for the London *Times*, as he follows a foraging party conducted by a detachment of General Kilpatrick’s men. Pryce watches as they approach a beautiful mansion, ornate in its architecture and formal gardens. “[Pryce] thought he might have been in a Midlands shire.”<sup>21</sup> On the porch stands an elderly man in pajamas calling for one of his house slaves to “show these Union beggars what they lookin’ for.”<sup>22</sup> The troops, “having been thus defined did not move;”<sup>23</sup> and Pryce could see their discomfort and their wish that they had rather be in battle, as the old man, now calmly seated, was in effect making them over to be rabble, a thieving pack of highwaymen. To Pryce, this old man was a recognizable lord of the realm, bred from generations of wealth to be accorded deference from the day he was born, stupid beneath the manners of his class, exactly the type and the reason, Pryce thinks, why he had fled from England, to avoid becoming such a one as his own father.

The encounter becomes increasingly ugly as the old man calls out his entire household of slaves, belittling both them and the soldiers. This, he asks them, is what you want to be? Free? Like the whole Yankee army, thieves and beggars, with no Massah to take care of you, he shouts, even invoking the image of the wandering Jew, “falling dead in a ditch somewhere with no Christian burial.”<sup>24</sup> In all, it becomes a riveting indignant outburst, until he goes inside, his family members trailing, while Pryce keeps expecting, and indeed hoping for a violent reaction from the troops. Instead, they deploy to the barns and out-buildings; and an hour later have loaded into their wagons huge amounts of food and whiskey and rich household furnishings—along with a string of mules and horses and a few of the slaves.

Yet something remained to be done. Were they going to burn the place, Pryce wondered, though Sherman had ordered not to burn homes where there was no resistance. In order to help him think, the sergeant in charge broke out a case of the whiskey. As a disinterested observer Pryce marveled at the spectacle of ordinary soldiers in the midst of such duties pondering moral issues. It seemed to him “a

flash of the quintessential American genius, dismounted troops walking and talking among themselves like a peripatetic school of Aristotelian philosophers.”<sup>25</sup> Not for long. A door flew open and a small black child came running towards Pryce, gesturing to be taken into the saddle with him, followed shortly by a young white woman, perhaps a daughter, coming for the child, brandishing a whip. A soldier got in her way and received a blow, after which he knocked her down; and soon others began tearing off her clothes as she screamed. By this point, with the old man coming back to the porch and despite the sergeant’s efforts to bring military order, the soldiers were all but out of control. Pryce, at the urging of the child, rode away, “through the rose and azaleas gardens with the pitiable shrieks and wails of the woman in his ears,”<sup>26</sup> wondering about how this war could transmute such things into military events.

So do we; and in effect, so does Doctorow. He does not take sides: he is, rather, like Pryce, a witness to the calamities that the war brought on, especially the gradual disintegration of human sensibilities. The chapter closes here; but we learn later what we assume had happened, when General Kilpatrick finds a dozen bodies in the woods, their throats cut, and a note boldly announcing THESE WERE THE RAPISTS—and nearby lie nine others, also executed, amidst shattered whiskey bottles and debris from their earlier plunder. This episode incorporates a number of aspects which pertain both to the general character of the war and to Doctorow’s creation of many moments like these. Clearly, the device of seeing from the viewpoint of a Briton the clash of cultures—a “stupid” baronial patriarch on the one side, a voracious juggernaut on the other—distances us as readers from making judgment on either side.

As for the drunken foragers, they had their reward, even though Kilpatrick, arguing that his soldiers had been murdered after they had surrendered—as if they had been carrying on military duties—threatens to execute a Rebel prisoner for very man lying there. On a higher plane, the rescue of the black child seems a resonant symbolic act, a *deus ex machina* which dramatizes the emancipation especially of the younger generation of slaves from the tyranny of the whip. The arc of his adventures, however, with Pryce’s desperate efforts later to rid himself of the child, who is taken in briefly by Pearl and finally lodged with an older childless black maiden lady, suggests something an index of the ultimate fate of many like him, who would never escape from the South: that the institution of slavery would evolve into a kind of matriarchal society.

After the cessation of hostilities, Sherman’s generous terms of surrender to the Confederate troops under General Joseph Johnson are regarded by his superiors in Washington, especially Ulysses Grant, as too widely lenient; and a compromise is deemed necessary. In his next to last appearance in *The March*, Sherman muses

on the relationship between the fierce and finalizing actualities of battle and the legalistic and nuanced language of settlement.

And so the war had come down to words. It was fought now in terminology across a table. It was contested in sentences. Entrenchments and assaults, drum taps and bugle calls, marches, ambushes, burnings, and pitched battles were transmogrified into nouns and verbs. It is all turned very quiet, Sherman said to Johnson, who, not quite understanding, lifted his head to listen.

No cannonball or canister but has language here spoken, the words written down, Sherman thought. Language is war by other means.<sup>27</sup>

## Notes

1. "2005 Final Book Awards Final," [www.nationalbook.org/nba2005](http://www.nationalbook.org/nba2005), 1.
2. Bob Thompson, "Doctorow's *The March*" Wins Top Honor," [washingtonpost.com/2/2/2006/1-2](http://washingtonpost.com/2/2/2006/1-2).
3. *Ibid.*, 2.
4. Robert A. Lively, *Fiction Fights the Civil War: An Unfinished Chapter in the Literary History of the American People* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1957), 106-107.
5. *Ibid.*, 3.
6. *Ibid.*, 4.
7. *Ibid.*, 5.
8. *Ibid.*, 13.
9. *Ibid.*, 5.
10. *Ibid.*, 43.
11. *Ibid.*, 75.
12. *Ibid.*, 75.
13. E. L. Doctorow, *The March*, (New York: Random House, 2005), 57.
14. *Ibid.*, 42.
15. *Ibid.*, 275.
16. *Ibid.*, 9.

17. Ibid., 358-359.
18. Mary Whipple, "E. L. Doctorow, 'The March,'" <http://mostlyfiction.com/history/doctorow.htm>, 1-2.
19. Lively, 21.
20. Ibid., 46.
21. Doctorow, 217.
22. Ibid., 217.
23. Ibid., 217.
24. Ibid., 219-222.
25. Ibid., 221.
26. Ibid., 223.
27. Ibid., 348.



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