

MYTHS, MORALS AND A HOUSE DIVIDED

PATRIOTIC GORE: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War. By Edmund Wilson. 816 pp. New York: Oxford University Press. \$48.50.

By HENRY STEELE COMMAGER

"THROUGH our great good fortune," said Justice Holmes of his Civil War experience, "in our youth our hearts were touched with fire We have seen with our own eyes beyond and above the gold fields, the snowy heights of honor, and it is for us to bear the report to those who come after us." Edmund Wilson devotes a chapter to Holmes in this book on the literature of the Civil War, but does not see fit to quote this much-quoted observation. He is of course familiar with it—Mr. Wilson is familiar with everything in literature. But it is probable that, though he is ready enough to accept the "fire," he is by no means sure of the "snowy heights of honor" and rather mistrusts all such rhetoric. Though Mr. Wilson addresses himself to the most emotion-laden chapter of our national history, he looks with suspicion on emotion. There is no failure here to recognize the emotion and the rhetoric—if you left those out you would have slim pickings—but there is little sympathy with them.

"Patriotic Gore" — the title is wrenched rather violently from "Maryland, My Maryland"—is the first critical study of the literature of the American Civil War (not the Civil War in literature, which is a very different subject). It is not a systematic study but a series of reflections on that literature and on the men and women, and the societies, that produced it. As with everything that Mr. Wilson writes, it bears the stamp of his personality on every page. It is original, skeptical, allusive, penetrating. It is discursive, ranging widely from North to South, and even more widely in time. It finds room for pre-war men of letters—E. A. Poe, for instance; for some who came after the war—Ezra Pound, for example, and for some who had little relation to the war at all, such as Frederick Tuckerman.

IN a long chapter on John De Forest—who rather surprisingly gets more space than any other writer, North or South—Mr. Wilson observes that there is a "fundamental non-radiation" about him. That is one thing that could not possibly be said of Mr. Wilson. He radiates, all right: each chapter proclaims his opinions and sentiments, his sharp impatience with insincerity or humbug in any form, his affluent learning, his penetrating insights, his

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Edmund Wilson Reflects on the Men, Women And Societies That Produced the Civil War



Photograph by Clarence John Laughlin.
"A South of aristocracy and grace and gentleness."

lively curiosity, the boldness and originality of his mind. He has taken a fresh look at many familiar writers—Harriet Beecher Stowe, for example, and Sidney Lanier. He has rediscovered some unjustly neglected or forgotten writers: the eccentric Francis Grierson, who could write on Mallarmé and also on frontier Illinois; the guerrilla captain John Mosby, who combined esoteric learning and high adventure; the vigorous Albion Tourgée. Mr. Wilson throws his net wide, to catch not only the familiar novelists and poets and statesmen, but travelers like Frederick Law Olmsted and John Trowbridge, and diarists like Mary Chesnut and Sarah Morgan and social critics like Hinton Helper and George

Fitzhugh, who invented sociology in America.

The author does not provide us with any master-interpretation of war literature, but submits a series of marginal interpretations. First, he is impressed with the way in which the war, or the writers, went about creating myths: the Southern myth of the aristocracy and grace and gentleness of the Old South and of the romantic attachment between masters and slaves, a myth which persists stubbornly in literature, advertising and the films. Or the parallel Northern myth of high-mindedness and moral superiority (which found classic expression in Mrs. Howe's "As He died to make men holy/ Let us die to make

men free,") and in the apotheosis of Lincoln as the Great Emancipator. Or the myths now so ardently propagated—by scores of centennial commissions and round tables on both sides—of heroism and gallantry and nobility and high adventure in the armies.

Second, Mr. Wilson notes how the war created moral problems, not only for participants, but for the writers and historians of future generations. He shows us this in the careers of De Forest and Tourgée. Both of these novelists managed somehow to see through the moral pretensions of the North and to sympathize with the South. He presents it in the diaries and journals of the intrepid women of the South, like Mrs. Chesnut, who witnessed all the evil of slavery, and bore its burdens, yet clung to the romantic notions of Southern superiority. "Under slavery," wrote Mrs. Chesnut, "we live surrounded by prostitutes God forgive us, but ours is a monstrous system, a wrong and an inequity! Like the patricians of old, our men live all in one house with their wives and their concubines, and the mulattoes one sees in every family partly resemble the white children." Yet she clung to her system, and was one of those who, like the châteline in Béné's "John Brown's Body,"

*Made courage from terror and bread
from bran
And propped the South on a swans-
down fan
Through four long years of ruin
and stress.*

THIRD, Mr. Wilson sees the war as corrupting those who participated in it, and who tried to square the myths with the realities of battle, prison, hospital—or with politics, or with Reconstruction. Thus in the talented but flawed writers like Helper who was so right, and so mad; thus in publicists like the indefatigable Fitzhugh, or Albert Taylor Bledsoe who had professed mathematics in Kenyon College, and practiced law with Lincoln and later vindicated secession far more successfully than did Alexander Stephens, or poor Edmund Ruffin who put a bullet through his head when the Confederacy failed. "To such mental and moral confusion," Mr. Wilson writes, "were the thinkers of the South reduced by their efforts to deal rationally with the presence among them of four million enslaved Africans." Northerners, too, were made desperate by their efforts to square romance with reality—Ambrose Bierce, for instance, who wrote so brilliantly and ended so mysteriously, or Henry Adams whom the Civil War did not educate.

A fourth interpretation is purely literary: Mr. Wilson sees the war as a kind of dividing line in the history of American style. The harsh realities, the importu- (Continued on Page 24)

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nate demands of war cast a baleful light on the rhetoric, the romantic insincerity, of so much of the writing of the time, and put a premium on brevity, clarity and sincerity. "The rapid transition from the complex, the flowery, the self-consciously learned to the direct and the economical," says Mr. Wilson, owed much to "the Civil War itself, and the great progress in mechanical techniques which followed the victory of the North." The classic contrast is, of course, Edward Everett's interminable address at Gettysburg, and Lincoln's. But contrast, too, the battle narratives of Gen. John B. Gordon, so fulsome and flowery, and the laconic narrative of General Grant, or—in another area—Mrs. Stowe's "Old Town Folks" and Sarah Orne Jewett's "The Country of the Pointed Firs."

Though Mr. Wilson invites us to contemplate a large and miscellaneous group of writers, he concentrates his attention on only half a dozen or so: not the conventional choices—Lincoln, Whitman, Lowell—but Mrs. Stowe, Francis Grierson, Grant, Lanier, George W. Cable, DeForest, and Justice Holmes, with General Sherman and the ubiquitous Thomas Wentworth Higginson as runner-ups. Mr. Wilson's tastes are, as always, catholic and unexpected; perhaps most unexpected is his

sympathy for the romantic Lanier. He examines the entire literary record of his authors, and their careers as well, for he is concerned to trace the impact of the sectional struggle, the war and reconstruction, on the American literary mind. It is interesting that all but two of his major writers should be Northerners, and that the two Southerners—Cable and Lanier—later found refuge in the North.

It is interesting, too, that the best of those Southern writers who do interest Mr. Wilson should be the women diarists. But aside from his two Southern literary figures, only one Southerner is given full-dress treatment: Alexander Stephens. Even Mr. Wilson's skill is unable to transform him into a literary figure, or make him more than a historical curiosity; the fact that Mr. Wilson had a choice between Jefferson Davis and Stephens for political philosophers tells us much about the collapse of Southern thought.

The fact is—as Olmsted pointed out, and Helper as well, that "the classical argument that the bondage of an inferior class . . . is justified by the use of his leisure that the liberated master may make has not been proved in the South." The South made much of its similarity to Athenian democracy: as slavery had made possible, there, a flourishing civilization, so it would

bring, in the South, a renaissance of art, literature and philosophy. Alas, all that flourished was slavery itself.

"Patriotic Gore" is highly selective, and if Mr. Wilson's selections are never arbitrary, his exclusions are sometimes surprising. There is, for example, no mention of Gideon Welles, whose "Diary" is one of the classics of Civil War literature. Gen. Joshua Chamberlain's eloquent "Passing of the Armies"—which has the best of all accounts of the surrender at Appomattox—is ignored. So are Thomas Livermore's austere "Days and Events," and "Life in the Open Air" by that gifted Theodore Winthrop who was killed at Bethel.

IN his criticism Mr. Wilson is unfailingly perspicacious and judicious, not easily misled by propaganda. Not so in his introduction. Here he is anxious to make clear that the Civil War has really no claim to a higher moral character than other wars, and that Americans are no less greedy and cruel and aggressive than other peoples in modern times. That much may be conceded. But what are we to make of the parallel between the Northern response to Southern secession and the Russian suppression of the Hungarian rebellion? Or of that odd interpretation of World War I—that we were seduced into it by British propaganda, and the assertion that had we

but stayed out we could have "shortened the war and left Europe less shattered and more stable?" Or of the astonishing statements that we were "gradually and furtively" brought into World War II by President Roosevelt who "had been . . . pretending . . . that he had not committed himself" (italics mine)—Roosevelt who had traded destroyers for bases, pushed through Lend Lease, and ordered the Navy to shoot German U-boats on sight.

Mr. Wilson seems even to subscribe to the myth that F. D. R. lured the Japanese into attacking Pearl Harbor, which is of a piece with the Southern myth that Lincoln planned the attack on Fort Sumter all along. And, for that matter, what are we to make of a theory of Reconstruction which asserts that the "North added every form of insult and injury to the bitterness of the Confederate failure?" Yet not a single rebel lost his life as a result of a four-year rebellion, and within a decade Southern statesmen were able to dictate terms of a compromise that in effect helped reverse a good part of the verdict of Appomattox. Mr. Wilson writes sympathetically of Southern resentment, even to this day, of "the wrecking by Northern troops of Southern homes, the disfranchisement of the governing classes," to which the obvious answer is that if you start a war you must expect to get

hurt. As for disfranchisement, the defeated rebels in Russia, Spain, France and Cuba would be pretty happy to settle for so mild a punishment.

"The real war will never get into the books," wrote Walt Whitman some years after Appomattox. He had in fact put a good deal of the "real war" into his own books—"Drum Taps" and "The Wound-Dresser," for example—and so, too, in time, did others. By 1879 Whitman had changed his mind. "A great literature will yet arise out of the era of these four years," he wrote, "an inexhaustible mine for the histories, drama, romance and even philosophy, of peoples to come—indeed the vertebrae of poetry and art for all future America—far more grand, in my opinion to the hands capable of it, than Homer's siege of Troy or the French wars of Shakespeare." The note of grandeur rarely sounds in Mr. Wilson's pages. But he does make clear that for those who search there is indeed an inexhaustible mine for drama, romance and even philosophy.

Author's Query

TO THE EDITOR:

I would appreciate pertinent information about Reginald Turner, an English writer who died in 1938. STANLEY WEINTRAUB,

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