

The Civil War

Kansas Humanities Council

TALK Series

Accepting the nomination of the Republican Party for his race for the Senate in 1858, Abraham Lincoln famously proclaimed, citing the words of Jesus (Matthew 12:25): “‘A house divided against itself cannot stand.’ I believe this government cannot endure, permanently, half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved – I do not expect the house to fall – but I do expect it will cease to be divided.” Lincoln lost that race for the Senate seat. And he would be wrong about the house as well: the union would be dissolved, for four long years of Civil War, with slavery the decisive issue in that division.

The house would be divided with the secession of southern states, with South Carolina leading the way (seven states had proclaimed their secession even before Lincoln’s inauguration as President in 1861, and eleven would eventually constitute the new Confederate States of America; twenty-three would remain in the Union). Full-scale war began with the first shots fired in South Carolina’s attack on Union fortifications in Fort Sumter in April 1861, and would continue until, after Sherman’s devastating march tore across Southern territory and ravaged Atlanta, as Confederate armies were weakened by key defeats in Virginia, General Lee finally surrendered at Appomattox four years later.

In a range of ways, the American Civil War was an unprecedented conflict. Its battles were fought across the full width of the country, from the east coast to Missouri and Kansas. In terms of casualties, its cost was unprecedented: with over 620,000 military deaths, it remains the bloodiest war in American history. In terms of costs for civilian populations, too, the Civil War was the costliest in our history. Estimates are difficult to establish with any certainty, but historians suggest twice as many civilian deaths were likely, and campaigns like Sherman’s march, targeting militarily useful infrastructure in the South, had devastating consequences for civilian populations as much as for the Confederate forces. With new, factory-produced weaponry and a critical role for the railroads, it was the first industrial war fought by Americans. It was the first war, too, for which the new technology of photography provided a significant record.

By war’s end, the issue of slavery at least would be resolved; if Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation technically only freed slaves in states that had seceded, it nevertheless effectively marked the end of the institution. But the real meaning of that emancipation would take the nation decades to sort out. It would be a full ninety years after the conflict ended that *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* would finally officially decree the end of school segregation, and decades more before that decision was implemented (some would argue it remains today more a promise than a fact). But the war left deep scars, and its legacy remains unresolved. Contemporary disputes – over the display of Confederate flags and monuments to Confederate warriors, over Southern politicians returning to the discourse of “state’s rights” that had informed secession, over the continued struggle of African-Americans to claim a full share of political rights and economic power in America, even over what to call this war that divided America (Southerners tend to prefer the War between the States, or even the War of Northern Aggression) – all reflect the continuing legacy of the Civil War on the contemporary American scene.

After celebrating the Civil War’s sesquicentennial in 2011, the reasons to continue exploring it are clear: because no political dispute came closer to destroying the United States; because the defining issues of race and inclusion began to be settled then; because the South will never forget, and never let Yankees forget that they will never forget; because it all started in Kansas, where the Bloody Kansas conflict, from 1854-58, provided a preview of both the issues and the methods of the coming conflict. The books in the series range from a first-person account from the Civil War era and a classic novel about the conflict to recent fictional revisitations of the conflict that so deeply divided the nation.

BOOKS IN THE SERIES

A Diary from Dixie (1905/2006) by Mary Boykin Chesnut

At the outset of her published diaries of the war years, Mary Chesnut proclaimed: “I do not allow myself vain regrets or sad foreboding. The Southern Confederacy must be supported now by calm determination and cool brains. We have risked all.” Mary Chesnut (1823-1886) was a woman of the Southern plantation elite, well connected (her husband served as an aid to Confederate President Jefferson Davis, and her house was frequented by many of the most prominent figures in the South), and passionately committed to the Confederacy’s losing cause. Through the course of the war, she worked in hospitals and witnessed the social costs of the Civil War, the slow destruction of her way of life. The journals she kept through those years, and carefully reworked for publication in the last years of her life, were finally published posthumously, and have long been treasured by historians and literary critics for their detailed reconstruction of the experience of the war from the Southern perspective. 426 pp.

March (2005) by Geraldine Brooks

The March of Brooks’s title is not Sherman’s, but Alcott’s. In Louisa May Alcott’s classic *Little Women* (1868-69), the father of the girls of the March family is absent for much of the novel (not appearing in person until Book II); he is away serving as a chaplain for Union forces during the Civil War, but his letter home in the opening chapter inspires the girls. Geraldine Brooks’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel reimagines the absent March, drawing on the autobiographical roots of *Little Women* to model her March on Alcott’s own father, Bronson Alcott, an abolitionist with utopian inclinations, and testing his ideological commitments in the theatre of war. He is writing a letter home on the opening page, speaking of how the sky, with its “colors swirled” in “happy profusion,” resembles the “marbled endpapers” of a book; he does not add to the letter that “the blood that perfused the silted eddies of the boot-stirred river also formed a design that is not unlike those fine endpapers.” Brooks’s novel is similarly about the things left out of the earlier story. 280 pp.

The March (2005) by E. L. Doctorow

General William Tecumseh Sherman’s famous March, the rapacious scorched-earth tromping of Union forces across Georgia and the Carolinas, seemed designed to prove his slogan that “war is hell.” E. L. Doctorow’s fictional reimagining of the event captures the scene: “They passed burned-out farmhouses, crops that had been trampled. Children barefoot and half dressed, with their thumbs in their mouths, stared at the soldiers from porch shacks.... All along the march, black people came down to the road to walk along with the troops and dance and shout and praise God.” Doctorow in this novel brings to bear the techniques for historical novel-writing he developed in his classic *Ragtime* (1975) and has repeatedly deployed in later fictions: a perspective that blends panoramic overview with local experience, employing a kaleidoscopic range of characters (Northerners, Southerners, men, women, blacks, whites), and freely mixing fictional creations with historical figures (careful readers will even notice references to characters in other Doctorow novels, including both *Ragtime* and *The Waterworks*). 363 pp.

The Red Badge of Courage (1895/2004) by Stephen Crane

For Henry Fleming, the protagonist of Stephen Crane’s classic Civil War novel, the fundamental contrast between his anticipation of war (“They might not seem distinctly Homeric, but there seemed to be much glory in them”) and his experience of battle (“It was a blind and despairing rush by the collection of men in dusty and tattered blue, over a green sward and under a sapphire sky, toward a fence, dimly outlined in smoke, from behind which spluttered the fierce rifles of enemies”) frames the hero’s growing consciousness of the realities of war. That new consciousness brings into question the hero’s initial idealized quest for a “red badge of courage,” the wound that proves his manhood. Crane’s novel blends a stately narrative voice, rooted in epic literature, with a naturalistic account of the experience of war that echoes in such later war classics as Erich Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), Norman Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), or Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* (1990). 146 pp.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Sources on the Civil War

Ira Berlin, ed. *Free at Last: A Documentary History of Slavery, Freedom, and the Civil War* (1992).

Robert Bonner, ed. *The Soldier's Pen: Firsthand Impressions of the Civil War* (2006).

Sarah Gardner, ed. *Blood and Irony: Southern White Women's Narratives of the Civil War, 1861-1937* (2006).

U. S. Grant. *Memoirs and Selected Letters* (Library of America, 1990).

Walter Lowenfels, ed. *Walt Whitman's Civil War* (1989).

Benedict Maryniak and John Wesley Brinsfield, Jr., eds. *The Spirit Divided: Memoirs of Civil War Chaplains: The Union* (2007).

William Tecumseh Sherman. *Memoirs* (Library of America, 1990).

Civil War primary documents at http://www.teacheroz.com/Civil_War_Documents.htm

Letters from the American Civil War at <http://civil.war-letters.com/>

Photographs of the Civil War at <http://www.archives.gov/research/civil-war/photos/index.html>

Histories of the Civil War era

Edward Ayers. *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: The Civil War in the Heart of America, 1859-1863* (2003).

Edward C. Bearss. *Fields of Honor: Pivotal Battles of the Civil War* (2007).

Eric Foner. *Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction* (2006).

Shelby Foote. *The Civil War: A Narrative* (3 vols., 1986).

James McPherson. *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (1988).

Notable Civil War films

The General (dir. Buster Keaton, 1926).

Gone with the Wind (dir. Victor Fleming, 1939).

Glory (dir. Edward Zwick, 1989).

The Civil War (dir. Ken Burns, 1990).

Gettysburg (dir. Ronald Maxwell, 1993).

CSA (dir. Kevin Willmott, 2004).

Selected recent Civil War fiction

Howard Bahr. *The Black Flower* (2000).

Alice Randall. *The Wind Done Gone* (2001).

Charles Frazier. *Cold Mountain* (2006).

Robert Olmstead. *Coal Black Horse* (2007).

Howard Frank Mosher. *Walking to Gatlinburg* (2010).