

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century : Survivors and Self-Teachers (1865-1915)

When the Civil War ended in 1865, approximately two million men had served in the Union Army, out of a population of twenty-three million: 750,000 had served in the Army of the Confederacy, out of a population of nine million, which included 3,500,000 slaves. Northern casualties had been 640,000 dead and wounded; those of the South 450,000. In addition, 220,000 Confederates had been captured by the North and 200,000 Union soldiers had been captured by the South. Measured against the size and wealth of the country, it was the bloodiest and most expensive war in American history. (1)

It was also a war that was recorded and remembered in hundreds of memoirs, diaries, letters, and other kinds of autobiographical writing. The index to Louis Kaplan's *Bibliography of American Autobiographies* (1961) lists 542 autobiographies from the Civil War, roughly 8 ½ percent of all the 6377 books listed. That, of course, does not include shorter pieces or unpublished material, and a great many more Civil War diaries, letters, and autobiographies have been published since 1945, the cut-off year for the *Bibliography*.

The classic Civil War memoir has long been Grant's *Personal Memoirs*. Thanks to Mark Twain, whose American Book Company published it by subscription in 1885-86, its two volumes had an immense sale, and they became, in a sense, the Union veterans' official history. But the *Memoirs* also received critical praise from contemporaries like Matthew Arnold and Henry James; and many later readers have praised it, too, notably Gertrude Stein and Edmund Wilson. Its plain style, its unromantic view of the war, and Grant's own directness and lack of military pomp make it a very appropriate record of a war that was won by the endurance and sacrifices of common men. No novels written about the war, with the exception of John William DeForest's autobiographical novel *Miss Ravenel's Conversion*, and Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage*, are nearly so sobering and realistic.

Nevertheless, a general's memoirs cannot possibly give the common soldier's or civilian's view of a war. He gave the orders: the soldiers and civilians had to carry them out and bear the suffering. It was they who were most likely to become casualties and prisoners, or to lose their homes and families. Writing their own stories was their way of insuring that these experiences would not be forgotten and that the parts which they played in the great epic struggle would be suitably recognized. Writing their own stories, which, thanks to increased literacy, a large portion of the population now could do, was also a way of helping themselves to remember and of leaving physical records for their children and other readers. Some diarists like Mary Boykin Chesnut and Cornelia Peake McDonald also went on to *rewrite* their stories, because parts of the original diary were lost and because they wanted to edit and polish them and make them more worthy of publication and thus celebration and preservation.

So much writing not only contributed to the total body of American autobiography, it also had a marked effect on concepts of the self and so on the history of autobiography.

Before the Civil War, as we have already noted, most Americans were reluctant to write their personal histories. It took the leadership of Transcendentalists, escaped slaves, abolitionists, feminists, and other people of outstanding talent who had had unusual experiences to start the ante-bellum self-liberation movement. Americans may have been inclined, as Tocqueville observed, towards "independent judgment," towards thinking for themselves and judging the world from their own perspective, but they were equally inclined, he noted, to conformity and a fear of appearing different from or better than their neighbors. (2)

And their concepts of self corresponded to this fear. "The self stood as no accommodating channel to enhancement or perfection," Lewis O. Saum said in his study of *The Popular Mood of Pre-Civil War America*, "it stood rather as an endlessly frustrating, dark-hued impediment." (3) The shadow of Puritanism was long and dark, and the newer, more optimistic lights of religious and political liberalism did

not fully penetrate its gloom, because liberalism taught that for the self to become generous, refined, and sincere it also had to be disciplined. These virtues might be natural; but they still required nurture.

Veterans of the Civil War, however, were likely to have a different view, if not of human nature, then at least of themselves and their comrades. The very fact of disinterested sacrifice for a noble cause—for preservation of the Union and emancipation of slaves, or for the Right of Secession and love of country—was proof of some higher kind of benevolence. The war's polarization of opinion further encouraged each side to celebrate its own heroes in these terms, leaving the enemy as the embodiment of evil: of selfishness, ignorance, crudity, and the forces of darkness. One's own motives and character were generous, sincere, and noble; the enemy's were the opposite. In this way, in fact, it was even possible to maintain both the old Puritan and the new liberal views of human nature. From the northern perspective the northern self was selfless, enlightened, and modern, while the southern self was dark and sinister. Contrariwise, the Southerner saw himself as noble and free and the Northerner as a tricky, deceptive, money-grubbing Yankee.

Because testimonies about wars inevitably require a way of dealing with one's own pain and suffering, as well as the suffering and death of others, these views of self and non-self, or Self and Other, were deeply inscribed into Civil War autobiographies. They were an integral part of the whole elegiac strategy with which writers justified pain and death and tried to make sense of the war. Here is the way, for instance, that Warren Lee Goss, a Massachusetts sergeant and the author of *The Soldier's Story*, elegized a man in his company who died at Andersonville, the Georgia prison, where nearly 13,000 men died in 1864-65.

C.H.A. Moore was a drummer...the only son of a widowed mother...In him all her hopes were centered, and it was with great reluctance that she finally agreed to his enlistment. A soldier's life, to one thus reared, is at best hard; but to plunge one so young and unaccustomed even to the rudiments of hardships into the unparallel miseries of Andersonville, seemed cruelty inexpressible...The day previous to his death I saw and conversed with him, tried to encourage him; but a look of premature age had settled over his youthful face, which bore but little semblance to the bright, expressive look he wore when he enlisted...He spoke of home and his mother, but his words were all in the same key, monotonous and weary, with a stony, unmoved expression of countenance...It seems to me that God's everlasting curse must surely rest upon those who thus knowingly allowed hundreds of innocent young lives to be blotted out of existence by cruelties unheard of before in the annals of civilized warfare. It seems to me that in the future the South, who abetted so great a crime against civilization and humanity, against Christianity and even decency, must stand condemned by the public opinion of the world...(4)

The drummer boy is thus eulogized for his youth, innocence and devotion to the cause. He was also a symbol of his mother's hopes and goodness, so that his suffering and death are all the worse because they are by extension violations of her, the person from whom he received his virtuous sentiments. The South, on the other hand, by "knowingly" allowing such "innocent young lives to be blotted out" has offended "civilization and humanity," "Christianity and even decency"—all the forces of good that Goss can list.

Conversely, here is the way Cornelia Peake McDonald described her home in Virginia in February, 1863, after it had been occupied by the invading Union army:

I sit every day and see this lovely place converted into a wagon yard. The smooth green turf has disappeared, and roads go over and across in every direction. Under the dining room windows runs one, and mules and horses continually pass, driven by men cursing and swearing, uttering oaths that make my blood curdle...

Under the parlor windows goes another road. Those windows used to look out on a sweet shrubbery of syringas, mock orange, white lilacs and purple...everything old fashioned and lovely that I delight in...[Now] all the long day through [pass] wagons, artillery horses,...soldiers and camp women, gay officers on foot and on horseback, and most sickening sight of all, Yankee "Ladies" in dainty riding habits, hats and plumes, pace by as if the ground they passed over was their own; and chatting with their beaux, glance around at us if they chance to see us as if we were intruders on their domain. (5)

“Yankees” are “cursing and swearing” mule drivers and disgusting, supercilious “camp women,” and Mrs. McDonald is too angry to stop and qualify these images with any further reflection that this is war and that soldiers and their camp followers are not genteel. Rather, she excuses herself for her “resentful and revengeful” feelings towards them. She wishes that “our artillery could, from some near point, sweep them all away.” (6)

The powerful emotions in these Civil War autobiographies helped to keep this war alive for generations after it was supposedly over, and this, in turn perpetuated the need for publishing more autobiographies, as apologists for North and South continued to build up the evidence for heroism or horror. In the ten years from 1862 through 1871, for example, seventy-four memoirs of Civil War prisoners were published. Interest apparently dropped off from 1872 to 1881, when only seventeen were published, but from 1882 through 1891, fifty-eight more appeared, followed by thirty-two in the decade 1892-1901, fifty-one in the period 1901-10, and twenty-seven between 1912 and 1921. (7) There were other reasons for this increase, too. Just as with the Revolution, there were controversies over pension legislation; elderly veterans wished to publish their stories before they died; and their descendants wished to honor them after they died. But ongoing rivalry of North and South continued to promote interest in the war and in the personal experiences of its participants.

Another significant difference between the prison story of Warren Goss and the narratives of Revolutionary prisoners, Indian captives, and others, is in Goss's interpretation of the meaning of his experience. Like other prisoners and captives, Goss saw it as a test of faith. He and his fellows had remained true to the cause and not accepted offers from the enemy to gain release by becoming turncoats. But the awful conditions of Andersonville-hunger, exposure, disease, and almost unimaginable overcrowding, with over twenty thousand men confined in an area of ten acres-pitted the prisoners against each other. Not all could survive, however strong their faith. Thus, as Goss shows, they fought among themselves, and “the strong often tyrannized over the weak” (104). To protect themselves, the prisoners developed ways of punishing offenders. To raise money for a little extra food, they developed simple kinds of businesses. The prison became a grotesque microcosm of nineteenth-century capitalist society, when “rough native force or talent showed itself by ingenious devices for making the most of little” (104). This was a world, as Goss describes it, where what later became known as social Darwinism definitely prevailed. Only the fittest survived, and Goss devoted great attention to explaining the techniques of his own survival, both physical and psychological. He needed a bucket in which to cook, wash, and carry water-and with which to trade such services to others, for their services to him. He needed to sustain his spirit, by humor and some pleasant thoughts, and by keeping up his hopes of escape, exchange, or parole, but without becoming unrealistic. Finally, he had to restrain his humanitarian impulses to help those who were weaker, sicker, and hungrier than himself, since, if he did not, he would die, too. With these lessons, Goss also justified his survival, overcoming the guilt arising from the fact that he had survived where others had not. Then he went on, directly and indirectly, to teach similar lessons to the post-war American society.

In the Civil War autobiographies, therefore, we see the emergence of a demonstrably different concept of self. The universalism of Transcendentalists, abolitionists, and revivalists has been eliminated or subdued. Not even Walt Whitman retains the optimism he had before the war. *Specimen Days* is a book of much more detail, of the speci-men and other specifics, rather than glorious universals. And when he celebrates himself, it is the tireless, gray-headed, middle-aged male nurse whom he celebrates, not the boisterous young democrat. This self, then, is a survivor and a teacher and a self historian more than a great liberator. Similarly, Frederick Douglass in his last volume of autobiography, the *Life and Times...*, devotes much more attention to the unique record of his own life as a public figure than to himself as a victim of slavery. To some extent, of course, these differences are due to the fact that by the 1880's and 1890's Whitman and Douglass were older, well-recognized public men, which they had not been before the war. Their individual stories now held significant interest for many readers. However, what gave them the license to tell these stories, and the forms in which they tell them, were the developments in autobiography which had been introduced by books like Goss's *Story* and Grant's *Memoirs*. The mundane particulars what Whitman had referred to in “Song of Myself” as “dinner, dress, associates, looks, compliments, dues”-which had once *not* been the real self, the “Me myself,” and supposedly could not be recounted-were now a very large part of this new self, and could be, even had to be, recounted.

Goss, Grant, Douglass, and Whitman had all survived to tell their tales, their *own* tales, and they could tell them with the expectation that book-buyers would want to read about them. Even people who had not been famous but had witnessed great events and survived could feel that their stories were important. Mary Boykin Chesnut, the wife of a Confederate leader, worked for years at revising and improving her diary and preparing it for publication, which it first received in 1905, nineteen years after her death. Other manuscripts were left with children and grandchildren or privately published and then placed in attics and state historical societies, preserved from a sense of patriotism and family piety. Cornelia Peake McDonald's story was first passed on just to her children. Her children then published a private edition of it for *their* children, but it was not printed in a public edition until 1992. Nevertheless, McDonald, like Chesnut and Goss, had felt that her story deserved being recorded and saved. Just having been a witness to the war and played a small part in it was reason enough.

The Self could become this more specific historical self because, as we noted before, these later autobiographers had less shame about it. The dark, evil self was no longer within but outside: in the shape, first, of the wartime enemy, and later in the shape simply of others different from "one's self" by virtue of race, sex religion, class, education, or status, Autobiography and the Self has become, or were about to become, more racial, ethnic, and status-conscious.

These cultural and political valences of the self, as we might call them, were not new. They can be seen, for instance, in Thoreau's distinctions between himself and John Field, the impoverished Irish bogger, as also between Harriet Jacobs-Linda Brent and Mr. Flint, her mean and insensitive white master. But starting in the late 1880's with Lucy Larcom's *New England Girlhood*, these valences also become associated with the past and with differences between the past of childhood and one's origins and the present, the time of composition, in a very different world. A wave of nostalgia was about to break on many Americans and with it a discovery or rediscovery of childhood. And much of this nostalgia identified childhood with an innocent time before the war and before the ethnic multiplicity that had come with late nineteenth-century immigration.

Lucy Larcom did not have as sheltered and idyllic a girlhood as Lydia Sigourney's or Catherine Sedgwick's (whose *Life and Letters* was published in 1871). She grew up in the declining sailing port of Beverly, Massachusetts. The old New England Calvinism was also dying, and she did not regret it, though she fondly remembered the old hymns. The death of her father, a retired shipmaster, in 1835 when she was eleven, was a drastic blow to family status and security, and her mother moved to the Milltown of Lowell, where she became housekeeper in one of the boardinghouses for the girl mill workers. Lucy, for her part went to work in the mills.

Working in the mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, in the 1830's and '40's, before the arrival of thousands of immigrants, was a utopian experience, however. The girls came from farms and hill towns from all over New England, and, according to Larcom, they were glad to leave those confined places, where the only paying jobs had been as serving girls. In this new, relatively cosmopolitan world they made more friends, and, thanks to the benevolence of the factory owners, went to lecturers, night schools, and music classes. They also had a chance to write poems and edit their own magazines, which was Lucy's particular delight. In 1846, she had a chance to go to Illinois, where she completed her formal education, then returned to New England, where she later became a teacher at Wheaton Seminary in Norton, Massachusetts, and an editor for Children's magazines. But the account given in *New England Girlhood* ends with 1852.

Although barely noticed, this is a significant date. Since the setting is nine years before the Civil War, Larcom could omit her later Unionist passions. It was also before the period of mass immigration that began in 1848 and became even greater in the 1880's. Larcom could, as it were, preserve, or recall the lost innocence of her "girlhood" of New England, just as Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1844) evoked the "boyhood" of the Mississippi Valley. Collectively, such autobiographies and autobiographical novels of childhood took their middle-class, Anglo-Saxon readers back to a seeming childhood of America, where there were no rumblings of war, immigrants, strikes, labor agitators, or tenements.

The next two or three decades saw the appearance of many of these nostalgic autobiographies of growing up: William Dean Howells's *My Year in a Log Cabin* (1893) and *Boy's Town* (1904), Edward Everett Hale's *New England Boyhood* (1893), Hamlin Garland's *Boy Life on the Prairie* (1899), Charles Eastman's *Indian Boyhood* (1902) and John Muir's *Story of My Boyhood and Youth* (1912). The early chapters of *The Education of Henry Adams* (written in 1906-7) and the whole of Henry James' *A Small Boy and Others* (1913) and *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914) belong in this genre, too. The anti-Semitism of the *Education* and parts of James' *American Scene*, are, therefore, not unique to James and Adams and their upper-class cohorts, but aspects of ethnic linkage and prejudice which had begun to be widespread. Ethnicity was presumably a matter of parentage and was normally simplest or purest in childhood. Yet, for ethnicity to be an issue, there had to be an awareness or alter awareness of other ethnic heritages and types-valences to avoid as well as valences to bond to. Therefore, "native" ethnic pride, be it New England, small-town Ohio, Prairie, Indian, or Negro, was but one feature among others involving various forms of ethno-centrism, ethnic anxiety, and ethnic prejudice.

Ethnicity was by no means the only theme in these reminiscences of girlhood and boyhood. A much older tradition, the success story, still endured having been handed down from Franklin to Barnum to Horatio Alger's novels about Ragged Dick (A series started in 1867), Luck and Pluck (started in 1869), and Tattered Tom (started in 1871). This was the tradition picked up by Andrew Carnegie, perhaps because as a Scottish immigrant he wasn't so prepared to write what reviewers liked to call a "delightful reminiscence" of a native-born childhood. The memory Carnegie begins with is one which was also a "lesson": his father, who was a hand-loom weaver in Dunfermline, Scotland, returning "to our little home greatly distressed because there was no more work for him to do." Then and there, writes Carnegie the millionaire, "I resolved...that the wolf of poverty would be driven from our door someday, if I could do it."  
(8)

"How I Served my Apprenticeship" (1894) is thus not only a success story, but also a grim, bare-knuckled account of what Carnegie learned in the worlds of nineteenth-century capitalism and technological development. The story was archetypal: from bobbin boy to messenger boy to telegraph operator to assistant to the superintendent of the Pennsylvania Railroad. There is more to the story, however, because Carnegie's even greater pleasure was his investment in "ten shares in the Adams Express Company." This required his parents' mortgaging their house, but it succeeded, and it taught "how money could make money"-the lesson of a real businessman, by Carnegie's lights. Thus his "apprenticeship" was not in an old-fashioned handicraft or trade in the traditional sense, but in capitalism, which was a success story of its own, at least to its persuasive advocates and apologists.

Comparison of Carnegie's little autobiographical essay with these others and with the autobiographies of earlier generations could be lengthy. His autobiography does not celebrate America or virtue or religion or nature or benevolence and civic improvement so much as it celebrates business and capitalism. Carnegie's aim, as he notes in the closing passages of his story, is to be "working upon my own account...being my own master, manufacturing something and giving employment to many men." This aim was apparently so socially accepted and easy to learn that he could direct his story even to children, for it appeared in *Youth's Companion*. Autobiography was again didactic, although, some people would say, no longer very moral. And any successful, surviving, self-teacher could write it.