

CIVIL WAR FILM PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH C. VANN WOODWARD

Two. One was named Johnny Reb and the other was named Billy Yank. That's, of course, an abstraction, but it means the common soldier. And he is neglected and needs better understanding.

How they are peculiar to this war and they are quite different from the soldiers of our 20th century wars. They were a good deal more undisciplined, especially the Southerners. They could be quite undisciplined, in fact. The very organization of forces required the election of officers of junior below a rank and that necessarily implied an equalitarianism that is inconceivable in modern warfare and in most warfare before that.

Well, if you have to make a choice, you have to know the nature of command and what its objects were and how successful it was, but the instruments of command are the common soldier and the junior officers and if those soldiers are going to behave in an eccentric way, it's well to know about it. And it's important for the commanding officer to learn his soldiers and their peculiarities.

Where would I like to be in perspective to--it's a hypothetical question but there are many puzzles and many curiosities. I would have liked to be looking on the inside of General Lee's mind when he was offered the command of the Union army and what went through his mind. And how quickly the question was answered, whether it had been answered before it was asked and what he based his answer on.

I would have liked to have been on the inside of many minds and one of them was Lincoln when he was facing the complexities and subtleties of the period just leading to the war. How much responsibility was he going to take for actions which he knew would lead to war and his decisions of those.... Well, those are two.

Well, my interests tend to focus on the Southern side and I think it would have been interesting to watch Jefferson Davis in his decisions about Fort Sumter and what he was going to do about it and why he did what he did and when he did it.

I would like to have been watching the high command debate over strategy in the South. Shall we go on the offensive in the Confederacy? Shall we make this a strategically defensive war entirely? Then there are key moments of battles that are fascinating. Those are some of them.

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Yes. The '63 is usually thought of as the high water mark of the Confederate enterprise and it may well have been...though the moment when Pickett was waiting for orders to start his charge that began the turn of the tide at Gettysburg and the defeat. The other great event was simultaneous and happening, namely the Vicksburg victory for the Union, Grant's great victory there. It was not as sudden and as dramatic as the Gettysburg but quite as important, I think.

I hope it doesn't reveal an elitist limitation in my interests, but the important things were decided by command. And how the invasion of Grant was going to be met and with the most economical use of the limited forces that were at the disposal of Lee. Those decisions were of great importance. They probably by that time were facing defeat. In a way it was a question of how long?

Oh where else but at the grand finale? At Appomattox watching the scene. That meeting is rarely equaled in the photography of the war, I think.

An unusual-- Mary Chesnut was a most unusual woman or she would not have written an unusual book she did. Not a typical Southerner. She however represented, I think, a Southern type, the Plantation intellectual which has a number of worthy precedents in the 18th century. And she was a provincial only in a physical sense, that is, she lived in one place. But her mind roved the whole world and she achieved that by a remarkable quantity and aestheteness of her reading. In English, French, German, she was a voracious reader.

Well, the most striking that comes to mind of her writings is not typical but only she could have written it in the Civil War. I think I can quote at least the start of it. I wonder if it is to question the rightness of slavery. I believe she said that Senator Sumner had never said a false word about that hated institution. Now that is a dramatic thing for a Southern woman to be saying in 1861, especially since it was only a few weeks since her own husband had spoken on the Senate floor denouncing Senator Sumner in very vehement terms and was the first to leave the Senate to resign his office there.

All night the Union army fled in retreat like horses scared by shadows, a stumbling flood of panicky men that had been brave for awhile and might be brave again on another day, but now were merely children chased by the night and each man tainting his neighbor with the same blind fear. When men or horses begin to run like that, they keep on running until they tire out unless a strong hand masters a bridle reign. Here there was no hand to master, no reign to clutch. Where the riderless horses kicked their way through the crowd and the congressmens' carriages choked, c and the sikes and the regulars covered the retreat and a few brigades were kept in some sort of order. But the rest, they tried to stop them at Centerville, McDowell and his tired staff held a haggard conference but before the

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They come to me and talk about God's will
In righteous deputations and platoons,
Day after day, laymen and ministers.
They write me prayers from 20 million souls
Defining me God's will and Horace Greeley's.
God's will is General This and Senator That...
But all of them are sure they know God's will.
I'm the only man who does not know it.

It is sullen Cold Harbor. The Union attack has failed,
Repulsed with a ghastly slaughter. The twilight falls.
The word goes round, the attack will be made again
Though all know now that it cannot be made and win.
An anxious officer walks through his lines that night.
There has been no mutiny yet, throughout all these years,
But he wonders now. What are the men doing now?
He sees them there. They are silently writing their names
On bits of rag and sewing the scraps of cloth
To their jackets while they can, before the attack.
When they die the next morning, somebody may read the names.

John Brown's body lies amouldering in the grave
Bury the South together with this man,
Bury the bygone South
Bury the minstrel with the honey mouth.
Bury the broadsword virtues of the clan
→ Bury the machine, the planter's pride,
The courtesy and the bitter arrogance,
The pistol-hearted horsemen who could ride like jolly centaurs
Under the hot stars,
Bury the whip, bury the branding bars,
Bury the unjust thing
That some tamed into mercy, being wise,
But could not starve the tiger from its eyes
Or make it feed where beasts of mercy feed.
Bury the feudal music and the dance,
The sick magnolias of the false romance
And all the chivalry that went to seed before its ripening.

The lonely with the chin like John Calhoun's
Knows it is over, will not know it is over.
Many hands are turning against him in these last years.
He is inflexible with fate and men.
It is over. It cannot be. He fights to the end,
Clinging to one last dream--of somehow, somewhere,
A last miraculous battle where he can lead
One wing of the Southern army and Lee the other
And so wrench victory out of the falling odds.
Why is it a dream?

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officers could order retreat, the men were walking away. They had fought and lost. They were going to Washington, they were going back to their tents and their cooking fires and their letters from Susie. They were going back home to Maine or Vermont or Howell(?) and they didn't care who knew it and that was that.

A smoke-stained Stars and Stripes droops from a broken toothpick and 90 tired men march out of fallen Sumter to their ships, drums rattling and colors flying. Their faces are worn and angry, their bellies empty and cold, but the stubborn salute of the gun fifty times repeated keeps their backs straight as they march out. Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard is a pose of conquering courtesy under a Palmetto banner. The lagubrious little march goes grimly by his courtesy. He watches it unsmiling, a life half real, half that of invisible footlights on his French dark and handsome face.

He was a stone,

A stone eroded to a cutting edge by obstinacy, failure and cold prayers.

...Cloudy apostle, whooped along to death

By those who do no violence themselves

But only buy the guns who have it done.

The situation is this. A wide Western river,
A little lost landing, with a steamboat store,
A post office where the roads from the landings meet,
A plank church three miles inland called Shiloh Chapel,
An undulating and broken table land,
Roughed into a triangle by bordering creeks...
And scattered in camps from the tip of the triangle
To the base at the landing are 33,000 men,
Some fairly seasoned in war, but many green sticks,
Grant's Army of Tennessee.

Muddy Washington, with its still-unfinished Capitol,
Sprawling, badly-paved, beset with sharp hogs,
That come to the very doorstep and grunt for crumbs,
Full of soldiers and clerks, full of all the baggage of war,
"Bomb-proof" officers, veterans back on leave,
Recruits, spies, spies on the spies, politicians, contractors,
Reporters, slackers, ambassadors, bands and harlots...
And one most lonely man in a drafty White House.

...For he will smile

And give you with unflinching courtesy,
Prayers, trappings, letters, uniforms, and orders,
Photographs, kindness, valor, and advice,
And do it with such grace and gentleness
That you will know you have the whole of him
Pinned down, mapped out, easy to understand--
And so you have. All things except the heart.
The heart he kept...a secret to the end
From all the picklocks of biographers.

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But he wonders now. What are the men doing now?
He sees them there. They are silently writing their names
On bits of rag and sewing the scraps of cloth
To their jackets while they can, before the attack.
When they die, next morning, somebody may read the names.

Sometimes there comes a crack in time itself.
Sometimes the earth is torn by something blind
Sometimes an image that has stood so long
It seems implanted as the polar star
Is moved against an unfathomed force
That suddenly will not have it anymore
Call it the mores, call it God or Fate
Call it mansel or economic law
That force exists and moves
When it moves it will employ a hard and actual stone
To bother into bits an actual wall
And change the actual scheme of things
John Brown was such a stone,
Unreasoning as a stone
Destructive as a stone
And if you like, heroic and devoted as such a stone
He had no gift for life, no gift to bring life
But his body and a cutting edge
But he knew how to die.

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The sick magnolias of the false romance
And all the chivalry that went to seed before its ripening
And with these things, bury the purple dream of America
We have not been. The tropic empire seeking a warm sea,
The last foray of aristocracy.