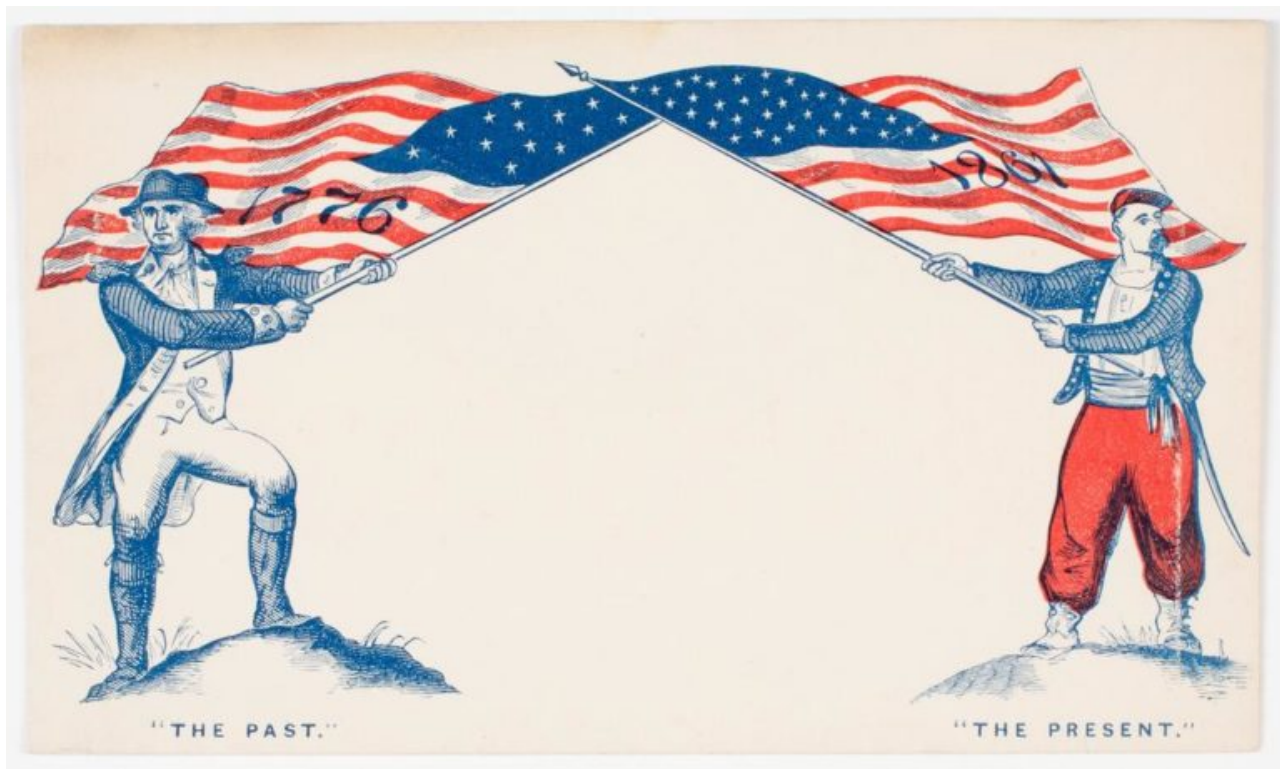


The Arc of the Moral Universe, and Other Long Things



It is almost a cliché to say the Civil War is still being fought—*de rigueur* to quote William Faulkner on the past (not dead, not even past) before considering some feature of the twenty-first-century U.S., from the merely quirky to the deadly serious. The whimsies of battle reenactments, light shows on Stone Mountain, and strange breeds of historical fiction may merely raise eyebrows. More serious extension of earlier battles, such as protests over the enduring iconography of the Confederacy, bring down flags in South Carolina and statues in Austin. They break stained-glass windows at Yale. Other echoes of the 1860s might make us wonder if the Civil War is still being fought strenuously enough. States contest federal authority over matters ranging from public restrooms to voting rights. The Fourteenth Amendment's promise of equal protection appears more elusive with every video of an African American shot in the name of the law.



"The Past" and "The Present," Civil War envelope, printed in red and blue ink by Samuel Curtis Upham (Philadelphia, 1861). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

The truism about the continuing war usually frames a narrative of incompleteness. The Civil War *is still being fought* because its conflicts are as yet unresolved (and they are indeed). But Cody Marrs's new book, *Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Long Civil War*, gives us another way—fuller, vaster, and more complex—of understanding the Civil War outside its time. In the imaginations of Walt Whitman, Frederick Douglass, Herman Melville, and Emily Dickinson, Marrs shows us, the Civil War *has always been being fought*.

The "Long Civil War" is very long indeed, and not only because what it started hasn't finished. Like a volcano bringing before our eyes the molten interior that lies, usually hidden, beneath our feet everywhere, the Civil War was one great eruption of something immanent in human civilization: an ineradicable cycle of violence, a timeless struggle for democracy and freedom. From the angles of vision Marrs's four authors charted during their later careers, the tragedy of the Civil War was not (as southern-sympathizing historians held for decades) that it wasn't avoided, nor (as anyone might reasonably wish) that no less bloody end to American slavery could be achieved. It was simply that Americans alive in the 1860s were the ones who had to endure so devastating a phase of historical processes almost cosmic in scale. The war belonged to a "longer conflict between freedom and unfreedom," an "almost endlessly repeating transnational and transhistorical cycle," and a "vast destruction that is unmoored from chronology itself," in Marrs's words about Douglass, Melville, and Dickinson, respectively.

Having lived through such a startling episode in these larger dramas understandably transformed these authors, and the war became central to their work. But their engagement with the conflict was quite different from the backward glance of that juggernaut of post-war publishing, the veteran's memoir. Rather than holding on to a discrete past, Whitman, Douglass, Melville, and Dickinson wrestled with the very structure of temporality as they tried to "track the war's almost untrackable history." It is no coincidence that these writers, whose late works themselves often dwell out of time in our literary histories—all tend to be regarded as "antebellum" authors despite their abundant literary output during almost three post-war decades—would have taken

a long view. All were relatively advanced in age when the Civil War erupted (the three men were over 40 in 1860, and Dickinson was over 30). In their maturity, they did not see the war the way many interpreters born afterward would, as an origin story for American modernity. Instead, they saw in those four years of conflict a briefly widened aperture on the deep workings of history itself.

Historians have been keenly attentive to frustrating continuities across supposed watersheds—like the persistence of slavery in sharecropping and convict labor, and the slowness of movements toward justice. Ira Berlin recently dubbed such unwieldy legacies *The Long Emancipation*. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall has written of “The Long Civil Rights Movement.” Historical studies of simmering processes give us a fuller understanding of the dramatic moments, the speeches and clashes, that make up schoolbook and popular accounts. We do well to consider what else is “long.” Is there a Long Jacksonian Democracy? A Long Mexican War? (There sure seems to be a pretty long War on Terror.)

It takes a literary study to explore the ways of being, the habits of mind, that history’s slow simmers call forth. For the authors Marris studies, the work of the Civil War is not just “uncompleted” but “perhaps uncompletable.” This is an almost terrifying thought—a Civil War without end—but it is urgent that we reckon with it, just as Marris’s writers reckoned with it throughout the final years of their lives: Douglass revising his life story, for instance, in the same iterative fashion in which he understood constitutional freedom to be evolving across time, and Whitman integrating his Civil War poems into the new temporal frame of an expanded *Leaves of Grass*. The way Marris unfolds the long narratives and deep patterns of authorial careers should inspire manifold revisions of literary history, as some of the contributors to this roundtable invite us to consider. It also should prompt us to reflect on how we make sense of the Long Civil War in our own century.

The unfinished Civil War may not be a struggle yet to be won, falling to us to carry toward victory. It may be that some struggles are timeless, and it falls to us—as it did to many Americans in the early 1860s—to persevere with no assurance of victory. It was before the Civil War broke out that Abraham Lincoln said the ideals of the republic should be “constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and, even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated.” It was almost 160 years later that Barack Obama said, “America is a constant work in progress”—said, on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, “the march is not yet over.” The tragedy of the Civil War may be that, although it will never be entirely won, it can still be lost.

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