Every Generation Writes Its Own History:

Thoughts on an Essential Civil War Poem

By Daniel Mallock (October 2017)

Robert E Lee in his office at Washington College, Lexington, Virginia. (Artist unknown.)

Noted historian, academic, author, and past president of the American Historical Association, Carl Becker (1873-1945), is credited with the now deservedly famous statement, "every generation writes its own history." Becker added, "we build our conceptions of history partly out of our present needs and purposes," ("What are Historical Facts?" Confederates alone. This backward looking judgmentalism of the present

generation does not stop at 1861 but goes back to the founders of 1776 and, for some, back to Christopher Columbus.

Everyone in the past is now, for many among us, viewed only through the prism of their present experience and temperament—judged and condemned for error or perceived error; triumphs, sacrifices, character, sorrows all swept away.

The best history is seen through the prism of those who lived through events, and tries to "get into the shoes," as it were, of those being reviewed and discussed. Their character, and the politics, cultures, people, and events around them and before them; their goals, and dreams, successes, and failures, are all taken into account. It is right for the historian to try to make sense of all of this and to yank lessons out of the morass of excess or dearth of information.

Every generation sees the world in a different way than did its predecessors. Thus, there are always new histories of events and people that hopefully add a new angle, provide new insights on newly discovered materials, or force the events of the past through the garlic press of today's cloudy prisms. Look on any book shop's history book shelf, there are always new books on Abraham Lincoln, the Civil War, and of specific battles. The books written on Gettysburg, for example, must number in the many hundreds but still more books appear yearly covering the same ground *but* (hopefully) with a different approach and angle (and newly acquired facts), perhaps. The best history does not only revisit, it rediscovers.

Great poetry should be both inclusive and expansive, containing a world on a single page that could readily fill a volume of standard prose. Great poetry ought to be a short-cut to take the reader somewhere they can never go, understand people in a way that otherwise they could not. We can never go back in time, at least not yet, and poetry as with history are among the few tools that we have to gaze

backward to attempt a meaningful and accurate understanding of people and events.

The setting of “Lee in the Mountains” by eulogist of fellow Virginian George Washington. Gone to the Caribbean after financial losses and shame, and injury in a political riot in 1812, Robert E. Lee’s father died in 1818 on his return journey home to Virginia; Lee the son was 12 years old having not seen his father since the age of 5. After the war Lee visited his grave for the first and only time.

Donald Davidson (d. 4/1968), a Vanderbilt student and later professor wrote this poem sometime around 1938. A member of the Vanderbilt “Fugitives,” named after a literary journal by the same name, he was among an exceptional crowd of superb poets and writers including Randall Jarrell (arguably the finest American poet of WW2), John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, and Allen Tate.

“The value of history is, indeed, not scientific but moral: by liberalizing the mind, by deepening the sympathies, by fortifying the will, it enables us to control, not society, but ourselves—a much more important thing; it prepares us to live more humanely in the present and to meet rather than to foretell the future.” This profound observation by Becker written some 60 years ago is pertinent still.

The value of Davidson’s excellent poem in addition to its beauty is that it humanizes Lee, and most anyone who has suffered tragedy and loss, and describes the heart wrenching internal devastation that such losses bring. With an extreme capacity for compassion and empathy so demanded of us by history we can fortify and ennoble ourselves by learning from what our forebears did and experienced and suffered. We can guard these people, and the lessons they left or judge them as unfit and remove them— such are the choices now being made.

Everything about history is about learning, in the final summing up after epochs, events, triumphs, tragedies, and lives are concluded. The prism of the current generation is a cloudy mess of facets that only become clear later, much later. Who has the skill and moral authority to reach into the past and cancel the lessons that were learned there? When future generations look back for the lessons of the past and find only empty spaces are the painful, important lessons lost forever?

The winds in the mountains are cold and do not forgive; people are merely wisps as the hills shift and the earth moves. Who can rewrite the past and expel the sometimes-unpleasant ghosts as if such a thing can be done, or should be done? What is the moral choice, as per Becker?

We are in the mountains searching, just like Lee. And, just like Lee, we have but a memory to hunt, a memory of something unreal, untouchable, that exists only in our moral heart. As per Becker, this is not science nor history, but a kind of reverse mysticism to atone and correct when no such atonement or correction is possible. In fact, the atonement is long concluded, the lessons learned, the leaders and the heroes in bronze. We are searching in the mountains for something we cannot find, and a chill wind is blowing.

After the collapse of the siege lines around the city of Petersburg and the swift fall of Richmond in April, 1865, Lee and his army were making for the mountains of North Carolina to meet up with Joe Johnston’s Army of Tennessee. Lee had no intention of surrender—even with his army shrunken and almost melted away. Lack of rations, Appomattox, and General Grant got in the way.

In this, one of the greatest of modern poems on the “late unpleasantness,” Lee finally gets to the mountains.

Poetry and literature help us build our humanity and adds to our understanding of ourselves—it is part of the fiber of our personal and national characters. Like history itself, historical poetry brings us back to memory and fortifies us for the future. The cool light of historiography is off, and now the warm and hot glows of emotion are on. Poetry demands a different kind of attention and fosters a deeper, more emotional, kind of involvement and learning. In historiography, we want “the facts” as a foundation; in poetry, there are no foundations at all.

The war is over and Lee is in the mountains, in a reverie on his father, lost in his sadness and bitterness, yet hoping for a bright future. The poem opens with Lee as president of Washington College (now Washington and Lee University) walking near his office. He can hear the students talking, there goes “General Lee.” After the war Lee cannot but help to evoke a sense of the past wherever he goes. The past hangs upon him like an anvil and like a sponge.

In the poem Lee is looking for a past he cannot have. We are in the mountains doing the same thing; so many searching, forcing a past that they cannot have, that they do not want to have—and cannot accept. It is as if they speak, “If the past cannot be changed, and since it is unacceptable to us, we will eradicate it—we are the living generation and have sway over the past. We are the masters of our past and of our future.”

What will the future generations say of this? What are the costs of removing those people and memories so fraught with sorrow, tragedy, and error? We must find the path down the mountain and quickly, out of the forests of the past and into the bright open fields of the valley plains.

> My experience of men has neither disposed me to think worse of them nor indisposed me to serve them; nor, in spite of failures which I lament, of errors which I now see and acknowledge, or of the present aspect of affairs, do I despair of the future. The truth is this: The march of Providence is so slow and our desires so impatient; the work of progress is so immense and our means of aiding it so feeble; the life of humanity is so long, that of the individual so brief, that we often see only the ebb of the advancing wave and are thus discouraged. It is history that teaches us to hope. (Robert E. Lee *Agony and Eloquence: John Adams, Thomas Jefferson and a World of Revolution*.

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