JOHN BROWN'S BODY

BY

STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT
THE BATTLE OF GETTYSBURG IN FICTION

BY ROBERT L. BLOOM

No military engagement of the American Civil War has been so thoroughly studied, analyzed, and second-guessed as that which took place on Pennsylvania soil the first week in July, 1863. Those familiar with the history of that war well understand the reasons for this interest. Whether Gettysburg was the turning point in that four-year struggle, a proposition often advanced and sometimes disputed, surely it was one of the critical encounters between the Yankee and Rebel armies. As Abraham Lincoln accurately prophesied, the world has not forgotten what those brave men, living and dead, did there.

This Gettysburg battle was ready-made for storytelling. It raged across open fields, through woodland, up and down rocky slopes, and back and forth over stone walls. Few engagements in history matched it in that combination of tension, color and drama, and complexity, the very characteristics of an event which stimulates the novelist’s imagination. Its dramatis personae was made up of 170,000 soldiers and innumerable civilians, each with its complement of heroes and the less heroic. Its three-day duration offered ample time for complicated plot and dramatic confrontation.

Pennsylvania history is replete with incidents sufficiently splendid, notable, and well remembered to lend themselves to the purposes of the writer of fiction. Even at the time it occurred, the battle at Gettysburg appeared a significant historic event. From London, Henry Adams noted that “there’s a magnificence about the pertinacity of the struggle, lasting so many days and closing, so far as we know, on the eve of our single national anniversary, with the whole nation bending over it.” The mélange of truth and romance in the Gettysburg legend has had, therefore, an irresistible attraction for writers of historical fiction.

It would be well to define the term historical novel. It is a long and complex literary work, normally in prose, which presents imaginary characters of the past as they reacted to those situations important enough to be judged as historic. True, in the novelist’s tale genuine historical figures often appear, but they are not always the central personages who think, feel, and act so as to make the story.

History as romance undoubtedly has greater appeal for most

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1 W. C. Ford, ed., A Cycle of Adams Letters, 1861-1865 (Boston, 1920), 1, 244.
people than history as a classroom assignment. In part, interest in the Gettysburg story, whether fact or fiction, reflects the American preoccupation with the Civil War. And this in turn explains the multiplicity of Civil War novels. It hardly matters that few of them made the best-seller lists or even have been acclaimed as great literature.

To understand fully both the strengths and weaknesses of fictionalized history in general, and that of the famous battle in particular, we must remember the differing functions of the historian and the novelist. Whereas the historian tries to photograph an event with becoming realism, the novelist attempts to paint a scene with impressionistic artistry. Often, however, the historian’s photograph lacks something. "There are irrecoverable things in history," we are told, "the close, intimate, personal things, the human touches." The historical novelist, at least the better ones, are able to recapture these without at the same time doing undue violence to the historical record.

This is not to say that the novelist’s story is always more trustworthy than the historian’s chronicle, far from it. Because he is likely to be more venturesome, has perhaps a more creative mind, the fictioneer is more vulnerable to giving vent to cherished prejudices. He is free to ignore or discount any historical evidence which would blur the picture he tries to paint. On the other hand, the historian is restrained by the discipline imposed by his profession and is more likely to rely on factual and tested evidence.

Yet, historians can miss something vital in telling the story of a battle. Normally, they have thrown the spotlight almost exclusively on the commanders, on a Lee or a Longstreet, or on a Meade or a Hancock. When they deal with Johnny Reb or Billy Yank, they treat him as part of a mass—a company, a regiment, a division, or even as a corps. In contrast, the novelist’s tale often is of the little people, those rank and file nameless individuals who participated in the collective action. As one perceptive critic has noted, "History will

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2 Robert A. Lively, *Fiction Fights the Civil War* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1957), 22, reports that between 1864 and 1948 no less than 512 novels of the genre appeared.

3 Frank L. Mott, in his *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States* (New York, 1947), lists only five Civil War novels among this exalted group. They include Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Stephen Crane’s *Red Badge of Courage* (1896), Winston Churchill’s *The Crisis* (1901), John Fox, Jr., *The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come* (1903), and Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind* (1936).

tell you what motivated a Washington or a Lincoln, but it is left to
the historical novel to probe the heart of his least follower."\(^5\)

That fictional accounts of the action at Gettysburg have their
shortcomings will be made clearer later on. Yet, novelists can flesh
out the bones of our predecessors, making them less the
disembodied ghosts so often described by historians. Arthur Schles-
inger, Jr., suggests that while novelists and play-wrights "are not
likely to alter professional verdicts" about the past, they can force
historians "to perceive historical figures not as abstractions, but as
human beings in all their idiosyncrasy and uniqueness." On the
other hand, Daniel Aaron believes that "in recent years, historians
and biographers have more often come closer to 'the real sense' of
the [Civil] War than fiction writers, poets, and literary critics."\(^6\) In
any event, novelists do attract readers who emerged from the school-
room with a sour taste for the dead past and instill in them some
reverence for their fathers. Even if historical romances are largely es-
capist in appeal, one can agree with the literary historian who ob-
served that "whatever takes one away from where he is and brings
him back refreshed, has a justification of its own."\(^7\)

Because of his unique ability and opportunity, the novelist bears a
heavy responsibility for the history he narrates. The better the work
of fiction, the more lasting the impression it makes. Too many
readers stop with the fiction. "Probably less than a hundred thou-
sand Americans," complained Bernard De Voto, "have read an adult
history of the Civil War and Reconstruction, but three million have
had some of its data and forces visualized for them by fiction."\(^8\) Har-
riet Beecher Stowe's partisan picture of ante-bellum Slavery made
an indelible impression. What many know of life in the embattled
Confederacy is limited to that described by Margaret Mitchell. And
it is just possible that most Americans know the Battle of Gettysburg
first and last as it was related in MacKinlay Kantor's novel, Long Re-
member or Michael Shaara's The Killer Angels.

How do all these considerations apply to the fictional accounts of
the events which transpired at Gettysburg in July, 1863? To what

\(^5\) Arthur B. Tourtellot, "History and the Historical Novel: Where Fact and Fancy
\(^6\) Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "The Historical Mind and the Literary Imagination,"
Atlantic Monthly, CCXII (June, 1974), 59; Daniel Aaron, The Unwritten War (New
\(^7\) Ernest Leisy, The American Historical Novel (Norman, Okla., 1950), 3.
\(^8\) Bernard De Voto, "Fiction and the Everlasting If," Harpers, CLXXVII (June,
1938), 43.
degree have novelists presented a picture of that desperate confrontation with acceptable verisimilitude?

Not all Civil War novels deal in depth with the Gettysburg story. For example, the most widely read of them all, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* (New York, 1936), makes but one passing mention of Gettysburg.\(^9\) For the purposes of this paper, therefore, only fifteen novels, all of which offer some detailed account of the battle, have been consulted. They comprise no exhaustive list but are the better known works. Some have had an influence far out of proportion either to their literary worth or trustworthiness as history.

Rating novels, Civil War or otherwise, is a risky business, and the mere historian exercises subjective judgment at his peril. Nevertheless, there is general agreement that Joseph S. Pennell's *The History of Rome Hanks and Kindred Matters* (Garden City, N.Y., 1944)\(^{10}\) is a first-rate novel. Of those considered here, it is the only one included in Robert A. Lively's "A Selection of the Best Civil War Novels."\(^{11}\) Stephen Vincent Benet’s *John Brown's Body* (Garden City, N.Y., 1928) is an epic in verse which has become a classic. The best for action and realism is MacKinlay Kantor’s *Long Remember* (New York, 1934), a credible story set entirely within the Gettysburg scene and which does not contradict conventional history. An acceptable fictional work is Ben Ames William's *House Divided* (Boston, 1947), which devotes innumerable pages to General Longstreet's ruminative qualms during the three-day battle. The most recent, Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels* (New York, 1974), won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1975. It is superior to most, but as a truthful picture of what happened at Gettysburg it has deficiencies.

The remaining ten novels to be cited are distinguished neither by their merit as literature nor their fidelity to historical truth. By far the worst of the lot is LaSalle Corbell Pickett's *The Bugles of Gettysburg* (Chicago, 1913), an amateurish effort by George Pickett's widow to refurbish his perhaps unjustly tarnished reputation. It is even inferior to the sugary outpourings of Elsie Singmaster, who explained Gettysburg in a collection of tales: *Gettysburg: Stories of the Red Harvest and Aftermath* (Boston, 1913).\(^{12}\)

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\(^9\) "Yes Scarlett," Ashley Wilkes tells the novel's anxious heroine, "I think the Yankees have us. Gettysburg was the beginning of the end. The people back home don't know it yet." *Gone With the Wind* (New York, 1964), Pocketbook Edition, 230.

\(^{10}\) Hereinafter cited as *Rome Hanks.*

\(^{11}\) Lively, *Fiction Fights the Civil War,* 12.

\(^{12}\) Hereinafter cited as *Gettysburg: Stories.*
THE BATTLE OF GETTYSBURG IN FICTION

1916), *Swords of Steel* (Boston, 1933), and *The Loving Heart* (Boston, 1937). In catering as she does to juveniles and prim Victorian ladies, Miss Singmaster condemned her romances to gather dust on bookshelves, deservedly unread and largely forgotten by sophisticated readers.

Somewhat better is *The Southerner* (New York, 1913) from the prolific pen of Thomas Dixon, Jr. This novel purports to be a fictionalized biography of Abraham Lincoln, but it is more fiction than biography. Mary Johnston’s *Cease Firing* (Boston, 1912) is less slanted, but the Civil War described in its pages is almost exclusively congenial to the “Lost Cause” tradition. Both Don Robertson’s *The Three Days* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1959) and Stephen Longstreet’s *Gettysburg* (New York, 1961) are potboilers, obviously tossed off to take advantage of the anticipated Civil War Centennial fervor. Finally, MacKinlay Kantor is guilty of a remarkable *tour de force* which he entitled *If the South Had Won the Civil War* (New York, 1961). This bit of fantasy begins with the Battle of Gettysburg as a decisive Southern victory, and it then goes on to suggest the consequences. The work rates as little more than curiosa.

Let us turn to these novels to observe their picture of those fateful events at Gettysburg. The story begins with the two combatant forces converging upon the erst-while obscure little market town in southern Pennsylvania. The Confederates approached by way of the Cumberland Valley to the west and north. Benet tells us (pp. 281, 285) that the invaders awed the “German housewives” and the “slow Dutch storekeepers” who were in their path. At Chambersburg, Williams asserts (p. 922), the invaders found a population made up of “stolid Germans.” And Mary Johnston (p. 166) describes them advancing through “that rich Pennsylvania landscape” that should have been at peace, “A Dutch peace—a Quaker peace.” Finally, Shaara (p. 4) dots the landscape with “fat Dutch barns,” whose owners spoke with German accents of the “plu” coated Yankee soldiers who had run away.

A small problem arises here. What happened to the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians who were at least as numerous in the valley in 1863 as the German element? Moreover, one would look long and hard to find in it any appreciable number of inhabitants of Dutch descent. Quakers were very few in number this far west in Pennsylvania. Are

13 "Stephen Longstreet" is the *nom de plume* of Philip Wiener.

14 Hereinafter cited as *If the South*. 
these imaginative flights on the part of the novelists merely examples of poetic license? Or were they perhaps unduly influenced by the memoirs of those Virginia and Carolina boys who likely found the Teutonic "foreign element" there more memorable than were the Scotch-Irish, an ethnic group more like the people they knew in their home communities?

While Thomas Dixon, Jr., avoids such demographic slips, he does confuse fact with fancy. He reports (pp. 421-423) that early in June the announcement that Lee's objective point was Harrisburg "struck terror to the Northern cities and produced a condition among them little short of panic." The trouble here is that no announcement was ever made in Richmond or elsewhere as to Lee's objective, at least not for public consumption. The Northern people in early June expected the Federals, under Hooker, not the defenders of Richmond under Lee, to do the invading. When the Rebel invasion got underway word went from Washington to Hooker to look to the protection of the Federal capital, not that of Pennsylvania. Furthermore, as news of the invasion reached Northern cities, newspaper editors expressed dismay, not at the public panic, but at the public complacency. Michael Shaara discovered somewhere that Lee's "main objective" was to draw the Union army out into the open where it could be destroyed (pp. ix, 17), but he never explains why this had to occur in enemy country so far from the Confederate base. Lee surely had greater strategic acumen than that.

Lee's "swift column," Dixon continues (p. 424), penetrated almost to the gates of Harrisburg "before Meade's advance division of twenty-five thousand men caught up with his rear at Gettysburg on July 1st." On that day, the novelist's account continues (pp. 428-429), "the two armies were approaching each other, marching in parallel lines stretched over a vast distance more than forty miles apart." One cannot award Dixon passing marks here for either history or geography. First of all, no division in Meade's army numbered anything like 25,000 men. Secondly, it was not Lee's rear but his advance that the Federals encountered near Gettysburg. Finally, the major force of Lee's army was moving east from Chambersburg as Meade's scattered units inched northward from the Maryland-Pennsylvania border. Had their respective lines of march paralleled each other, as Dixon says, they would have missed

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contact and a colorful chapter of Pennsylvania history would be nonexistent.\(^\text{16}\)

Dixon, called "the most professional of Southerners,"\(^\text{17}\) made a curious attempt to join the worshippers at the Lincoln shrine. He had sufficient grasp of the strategic situation to sense Lincoln's anxiety as Lee's army moved into Pennsylvania. Yet, he embellishes his tale with an incredible episode. He imagines the deeply worried President summoning George Brinton McClellan to the White House (p. 427) and offering to resign the presidential office if only the general will assume over-all command. In the Dixon version, Lincoln assures the once discredited commander, "I will withdraw in your favor and force my Party to endorse you . . . [and] your election will be a certainty." Not only does this scenario lack a scrap of corroborative evidence, but the picture of a distraught and craven Lincoln is totally out of character with what we know, and Dixon should have known, of the President. Nothing in the Lincoln record persuades one that he ever would have contemplated such a folly. Dixon perhaps read somewhere that self-appointed advisors had urged the President to replace Hooker with McClellan,\(^\text{18}\) but the novelist mistook Lincoln's well-known humility for an exaggerated self-abasement totally at variance with the historical record. How McClellan in the White House could have guaranteed a Union victory at Gettysburg Dixon does not bother to explain.

Meanwhile, the two armies neared their rendezvous at Gettysburg with each commander groping to learn the position of the enemy. Stephen Vincent Benet failed to clarify matters when he wrote (p. 287):

> All we know is—Meade intended to fight some fifteen miles away along the Pipe Creek Line. And where Lee meant to fight, if forced to fight we do not know, but it was not there where they fought.

If the poet had had available Douglas Southall Freeman's monu-

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\(^{16}\) Dixon exhibits equal confusion as to the diplomatic situation at the time. He has (p. 421) the British government "eager for a chance to strike the Republic" and egging on Napoleon III of France "to interfere in our affairs." Actually, he has reversed the respective roles taken by the British ministry and the French Emperor. See Ephraim D. Adams, *Great Britain and the Civil War* (Gloucester, Mass., 1957), 11, 33-74.

\(^{17}\) Lively, *Fiction Fights the Civil War*, 93.

mental biography of the Southern commander, he no doubt would have been less uncertain as to where Lee "meant to fight." Historians say that Meade considered taking a defensive stand along Pipe Creek in northern Maryland while Lee thought of awaiting a Federal attack at Cashtown, nine miles west of Gettysburg.

Some confusion exists among novelists as to the size and location of the Gettysburg crossroads. Stephen Longstreet (p. 10) described it vaguely as "fifteen hundred people, and six blocks one way and eight or nine the other." Mary Johnston (p. 148) placed the battle at "the town of Gettysburg, where they made boots and shoes." That myth, that in 1863 Gettysburg had a shoe factory, is one that will not die. Unfortunately, some historians are guilty of prolonging its life. Miss Johnston adds that Gettysburg "lay among orchards and gardens at the foot of South Mountain" and that "it numbered four thousand inhabitants." But South Mountain is at least ten miles to the west, and the federal census for 1860 puts the town's population at approximately twenty-two hundred souls. However, Miss Johnston was not alone in altering geography and terrain to suit her purposes. Elsie Singmaster, whose long time residence in the community should have made her better informed, locates the Maryland border "but five miles away" (Swords of Steel, p. 142) and puts the Round Tops "several miles" from the Emmitsburg Road (Emmeline, p. 35). In actual fact, the Maryland line is nearly twice the distance from Gettysburg that she indicates, and the Emmitsburg Road is a thoroughfare that passes by the Peach Orchard barely a mile from those two prominent hills.

"The historical novel," we are reminded, "could not come into being until after history established itself." In other words, until historians determine what happened and report it, the novelist cannot construct a credible version of it. The military operations of the first day at Gettysburg are confusing enough, and even historians differ as to the details. But their differences are minor compared to those of some novelists who were spurred more by the creative urge than the desire to be accurate. For example, history records that the Gettysburg battle lasted for three days, beginning on Wednesday, July 1st. By some incredible lapse, Elsie Singmaster's Emmeline (pp. 134-135, 137) opens the fighting on a Tuesday and then describes

20 Coddington, Gettysburg Campaign, 197, 239.
Pickett's climactic charge as occurring on Friday. Another example: Mary Johnston asserts (p. 166) that Confederate General Henry Heth on that first day confronted Federal cavalry and infantry with but a brigade (that is, less than 2,000 men) instead of the division (approximately 6,000 men) that he actually commanded. Dixon matches this error by writing (p. 429) that "Buford's advance guard . . . struck Hill's division . . . before the town of Gettysburg." In fact, Hill commanded an entire corps and to turn the facts around and have Buford's Federal cavalry strike the first blow may illustrate one Southerner's view that even in Pennsylvania the Yankees were the aggressors.

Novelists and historians alike agree that the death of General John F. Reynolds on that first day was a grievous loss to the Federals. But when and how did he suffer his fatal wound? Historians agree that it was within one-half hour of his arrival at the scene, that is, about ten-thirty o'clock. But Benet says (p. 293) that it was "in the first of the fight," which if true would have put it at least two hours earlier. Don Robertson (p. 89) is nearer the conclusion advanced by historians when he has Reynolds slain at eleven o'clock. Who fired the deadly bullet? Historians are uncertain, but not MacKinlay Kantor and Stephen Longstreet. Kantor (Long Remember, p. 263) awards the honor, if honor it be, to twenty-one-year-old Rufus Canty of the 5th Alabama, who did the deed with a five-round Spencer "captured from a Yankee only two months before," and Longstreet (p. 66) learned somewhere that he was "a coon-hunting Rebel sharp-shooter [who] split the blue head at a hundred yards (that's the way his grandchildren heard it)." Historians, no doubt, should be grateful for these details which heretofore have escaped their researches.

Emerging from the numerous tales of civilians caught in the way of the battle is that of old John Burns, cobbler, constable, and part-time farmer. That this village character was not wholly fictional is attested by a battlefield memorial which asserts that he carried a gun out to McPherson Ridge to defend his town and country. What alert novelist could pass up this episode? But what kind of gun did he use? Tradition has it that it was the flintlock musket he had used in the 1812 war. Elsie Singmaster in her Swords of Steel (p. 152) saw him "puffing up the hill . . . his musket in his hand." According to Kantor, however, he obtained a United States army rifle from a wounded soldier. Bret Harte, in his famous poem, "John Burns of Gettysburg," is contented with noting merely the old man's "long
brown rifle," although the poet takes other liberties with the John Burns story. A photograph taken shortly afterwards of the convalescent septuagenarian (he suffered three wounds) also shows his rifle which definitely was not a government-issue piece of the Civil War era.\textsuperscript{22}

In a general way, the chronology of the first day’s fight at Gettysburg has been well-established. Some novelists, however, prefer to reconstruct the action according to their own time sequence. Thus, Robertson (p. 73) has Howard’s Union XI Corps arriving “at nine in the morning of July 1, 1886 [sic],” and Shaara (p. 101) tells his readers that General Reynolds and General Buford were placing the Union I Corps at McPherson’s Woods in the morning with Howard’s men “swung out to the right” behind them. Both Robertson and Shaara are contradicted by historians of the battle. Coddington writes that the first units of the XI Corps arrived in the town from the south around one o’clock “much out of breath.”\textsuperscript{23} It must have taken at least another half hour or more to get them into position north of Gettysburg. Moreover, both Robertson (pp. 77, 109) and Shaara (p. 155) describe Howard’s command as made-up of Germans. But Coddington notes that nearly 50 percent was composed of the “so-called old Yankee stock.”\textsuperscript{24} This should demolish another myth, but probably that is too much to expect. Robertson (p. 109) speaks of “those Chancellorsville Germans . . . brilliant in their defense of Oak Hill.” Yet the XI Corps got nowhere near enough to the promontory to defend it and the gap between it and the Union I Corps contributed materially to the collapse of the Federal line in mid-afternoon.

When did Winfield Scott Hancock arrive to rally the dispirited and disorganized Federal units which were in full flight through Gettysburg to the safety of Cemetery Hill south of the town? Dixon’s categorical statement (p. 429) that it was at three o’clock would support Benet’s picture (p. 293) of Hancock taking command in “mid-combat.” However, by the time the intrepid Union general arrived, the fighting was practically ended for the first day. Glenn Tucker, after careful analysis, concludes that Hancock could not have arrived before four or four-thirty, just in time to witness the precipitous

\textsuperscript{22} The photograph is reproduced in Francis Trevelyan Miller, ed., \textit{A Photographic History of the Civil War} (New York, 1911), IX, 209.

\textsuperscript{23} Coddington, \textit{Gettysburg Campaign}, 279. See also Warren W. Hassler, Jr., \textit{Crisis at the Crossroads} (University, Ala., 1970), 66.

\textsuperscript{24} Coddington, \textit{Gettysburg Campaign}, 306.
withdrawal of the scattered Federal troops.\textsuperscript{25}

In his \textit{If the South Had Won the Civil War}, MacKinlay Kantor makes no pretense at telling it like it was. His story of the three-day engagement ends with a smashing Confederate triumph and the demoralized Yankees reeling back to Washington in style reminiscent of Bull Run in July, 1861. Kantor does imply that the first day's struggle determined the outcome of the battle, a conclusion shared by some historians.\textsuperscript{26} But the novelist turns the events of that day upside down. He follows the accepted course of events until the Confederates drive their foes through the town and then begins his "what if." Long before dusk, runs this fantasy, Ewell's Corps had stormed Cemetery Hill and wrested it from its Federal defenders who were stumbling in hasty flight down the Baltimore Pike. Kantor then quotes a British observer recalling Lee's remark, "I didn't know Dick Ewell could move so rapidly."\textsuperscript{27}

Those familiar with the accepted accounts will recognize Kantor's recital as the ultimate in fiction. Yet, it offers a valuable contribution to an understanding of the true "iffyness" of this battle. The novelist makes clearer how tenuous are the uncertainties of circumstances on any battlefield. This is a consideration which some historians, in their eagerness to relate what actually happened, often overlook. It must be said that in this pseudo-history (pp. 33-39) Kantor's summation of the causes for the Federal defeat at Gettysburg illustrates this point perfectly.

Some novelists confuse the events of the second day as much as they have the first, particularly chronology. On the morning of that day both Lee and Meade were readying their troops for the impending showdown. Ben Ames Williams (p. 935) and Michael Shaara (p. 150) tell us that Lee conferred with his lieutenants at his headquarters "in a small stone house on Seminary Ridge." This can be misleading, since Lee normally did not set up headquarters in a house and no acceptable evidence exists that he made an exception to this rule while at Gettysburg.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{25} Paper read at the Fourth Annual Civil War Study Group, Gettysburg College, August 1, 1961, 13-14.
\textsuperscript{26} The first day's fight, argues Hassler (p. vii), "was quite as important and significant as the succeeding two days' combat."
\textsuperscript{27} Kantor, \textit{If the South Had Won the Civil War}, 29-33.
\textsuperscript{28} Dr. Frederick Tilberg, former historian of the Gettysburg National Military Park, does not accept the evidence advanced by the commercial proprietors of the stone house that Lee used it as his headquarters. For testimony as to Lee's headquarters at Gettysburg, see John D. Imboden's "The Retreat from Gettysburg." \textit{Battles and Leaders}, ed. by R. U. Johnson and C. C. Buel (New York, 1953), III, 421-422.
As the historical record makes plain, Lee's tactics for July 2 envisaged Longstreet's Corps striking the Federal left on Cemetery Ridge with Ewell, at Culp's Hill at the other end of the line, creating a diversion. But Robertson revises Lee's plans and reverses the roles of Longstreet and Ewell. He reports (p. 151) that "Ewell's attack . . . came first, as Lee had planned," and later (p. 172) that as Longstreet's men moved forward, "Ewell's attack on Culp's Hill . . . finally was gaining some momentum." This version could not be at greater variance with the story reported in the official records and by subsequent historical accounts. It does not even have justification as furthering dramatic effect, which is about the novelist's only excuse for falsifying history.

A more manifest example of one fictionalizer's carelessness is found in the pages of Stephen Longstreet's *Gettysburg*. So insensitive is this teller of tales that he further tarnishes his third-rate novel with glaring anachronisms. One of them (p. 140) has General Meade on July 2 musing about "the damn draft riots . . . in New York City," riots which did not begin there until ten days later. Even more spurious is his story of fourteen-year old Marc Melville who, while wolfing his picnic lunch on the fringe of the battlefield, announces to his companions (p. 194): "I'm an escaped prisoner from Andersonville, and I'm eating mule, maybe dog!" Young Marc must have possessed extraordinary extrasensory powers, since the first Federal prisoners of war did not arrive at that infamous prison camp before the following February.

Just when Longstreet got his delayed attack of July 2 underway is not clear. But when it came, Dixon declares (p. 431), it came with "reckless daring," and Benet (p. 299) was impressed by its "pugnacious strength." The vigor of the assault is a matter of controversy among historians—Douglas Southall Freeman says that "Longstreet was not to be hurried." Freeman was hardly the most impartial commentator, but Ben Ames Williams, in his sympathetic portrayal of Lee's "Old Warhorse," describes (p. 977) the downcast general giving way to self-critical reflections for his slowness. Both critics and defenders of Longstreet, and he has plenty of both, could draw support for their respective judgments from either history or fiction.

30 William B. Hesseltine, *Civil War Prisons* (Columbus, 1930), 135.
31 Freeman, *Lee's Lieutenants*, III, 122. Also see Coddington, *Gettysburg Campaign*, 443-444.
Although Ewell's demonstration at the Federal right came too late to help Longstreet's assault, his troops did fight their way to the crest of Cemetery Hill. Overwhelmed and cut down in a furious struggle, the survivors retired back down the slopes in the moonlight. Few novelists have done justice to this really stirring encounter on the hilltop. Benet and Kantor are exceptions. Yet, the former adds a word of caution (p. 305) which novelists and historians alike could note with profit.

On the crest of the hill, the sweaty cannoneers... It is said they cried Wildly, "Death on the soil of our native state Rather than lose our guns." A general says so. He was not there. I do not know what they cried...32

One source has put the number of Civil War battles and skirmishes at 2,261, nine of which took place in Pennsylvania.8 If Gettysburg is one of the best known, Pickett's Charge is the best known action of that battle. It was the heroic and costly if fruitless advance of Southern infantry against the Federal center on Cemetery Ridge which has been longest remembered.

One would surmise that there remains little doubt as to an action so frequently discussed—why it occurred, what occurred, and what were the results of Lee's daring gamble. Sometimes, however, sectional bias creeps into the accounts. As a loyal son of Virginia, Douglas Southall Freeman likely saw it differently from the Hoosier, Kenneth P. Williams. And no doubt Frank Haskell, a Union officer on Cemetery Ridge, viewed it otherwise than did Arthur Fremantle, a pro-Southern British observer, who watched the charge from Seminary Ridge. Therefore, we can hardly fault American novelists who describe the grand assault in accordance with their sectional sympathies.

Sectional inclinations, however, can interfere with historical truth, especially when they exaggerate that truth beyond all bounds. Thus, Thomas Dixon, Jr., lapses inexcusably from verifiable fact when he writes (p. 433) that "Pickett's division of fifteen thousand men" moved against "an impregnable hill held by seventy thousand entrenched soldiers." In Williams's novel Longstreet explains to Fremantle (p. 1005) the reasons for the failure of the charge: "Why, we

32 Kantor's treatment is his description in his Long Remember (pp. 340-343) of Dan Bales's nightlong ordeal on the slopes of Cemetery Hill
33 Miller, A Photographic History of the Civil War, 1, 104.
threw fifteen thousand men against a hundred thousand.’’\textsuperscript{34} The odds against the Southerners were formidable enough without such hyperbole.

What of this generally accepted figure of 15,000 in the assaulting column? Historians and novelists alike have been bemused by Longstreet’s reputed warning to Lee that ‘‘there never was a body of fifteen thousand men who could make that attack successfully.’’\textsuperscript{35} Two reputable historians, however, place the number who crossed the shot-ravaged fields much lower.\textsuperscript{36} Whatever the number employed here by Lee, it proved not nearly enough.

Did Longstreet take a nap before the beginning of the deafening artillery barrage that preceded the Southern attack? Freeman, taking Fremantle’s word for it, said that he did, but Longstreet himself in later years denied it.\textsuperscript{37} Williams (p. 992) accepts Longstreet’s word while Shaara (p. 318) is noncommittal on the subject. At any rate, Longstreet soon was roused by what Benet described (p. 310) as ‘‘the unhushed roar of two hundred and fifty cannon firing like one.’’ So loud a noise they made that

\begin{quote}
By Philadelphia eighty odd miles away  
An old man stooped and put his ear to the ground  
And heard that roar.
\end{quote}

Historians are uncertain as to the number of cannon used in this artillery duel, and one might conclude that when novelists themselves disagree on the matter it is of relative unimportance.\textsuperscript{38} Even if the number 250 is entirely too large, they certainly made a roar, although one can doubt it was heard at Philadelphia which is more than 100 miles away.

The misnamed Pickett’s Charge (not a charge in the normal sense

\textsuperscript{34} This Longstreet-Fremantle conversation was a figment of the novelist’s imagination. Neither of the principals mention it in their battle recollections. In his \textit{Pickett’s Charge} (Boston, 1959), 174, George Stewart estimates the number of Federals defending the Union Center at about fifty-seven hundred men.

\textsuperscript{35} Cited in Coddington, \textit{Gettysburg Campaign}, 460. Markers on the Gettysburg battlefield repeat the 15,000 figure.

\textsuperscript{36} Stewart, \textit{Pickett’s Charge} (p. 173) thinks that no more than 10,500 men actually made up the Southern attacking columns, and Coddington, \textit{Gettysburg Campaign} (p. 462) puts the figure at 13,500.


\textsuperscript{38} In his novel on Gettysburg Stephen Longstreet says (p. 287) that 200 Union guns responded to the Confederate fire, a number entirely too large. Robertson writes (p. 462) that Lee used 120 guns, a figure too small. Coddington (pp. 497, 799) reports the Federals having 80 guns at the Union Center plus 40 more firing from Cemetery Hill.
and not led by Pickett) followed the cannoneers’ passage-at-arms. Mary Johnston described it in some detail (pp. 176-177), but from her pages one would never guess that anyone but Virginians dared it. LaSalle Pickett’s wifely devotion led her to place her husband in the van (p. 120), “leading his men into the flames of battle with an air of chivalrous lightness and grace.” Dixon declares (p. 432) that the Southerners were repulsed in part because they faced an enemy armed with “Spencer repeaters,” a statement not supported by any historical evidence.89

What did their valiant attempt cost the determined Confederates? George Stewart calculates that Lee lost in the hour’s action 6,467 men, or about 62 percent of the total. As enormous as such losses were, they are not large enough for the purposes of some novelists. Robertson refers (p. 256) to “these two thousand remaining” of the original 15,000, and Benet says (p. 313) Pickett returned to his lines with but a third of his men. Even accepting Stewart’s more cautious estimate, it is evident that the losses were horrendous. More tragic yet, as Freeman notes, was the loss of competent field commanders such as General Lewis Armistead. Armistead fell mortally wounded amidst the cannon within the Federal lines, and his dying words are even yet a matter of differing interpretation among historians.40

Conventional history is silent as to who fired the shot that brought Armistead down, but as he did in the case of John F. Reynold’s death, MacKinlay Kantor sheds light on what was hitherto obscure. In Long Remember (p. 367) we learn that just as Armistead was about to sink his sword into the body of Tyler Fanning, he was felled by a desperate shot fired by Dan Bales.

It is clear that novelists often go beyond the limits imposed on the historian. Too many have prostituted their facility with the written word to make their products more marketable. They have assumed, as Brander Matthews has observed, “that the liking for historical fiction is now so keen that the public is not at all particular as to the veracity of the history out of which the fiction has been manufactured.”41 An anonymous savant once wrote that “Most history is false, save in names and dates, while a good novel is generally a

89 “As far as can be determined,” Coddington states in Gettysburg Campaign, 258, “no infantryman, unless he had bought one for himself, used at Gettysburg a Spencer or Henry repeater.

40 Stewart, Pickett’s Charge, 254-255, implies that the dying Armistead recanted his decision to fight for the Secessionists. The Shaara view of Armistead’s words appears more reasonable than Professor Stewart’s interpretation of them. Michael Shaara, The Killer Angels (New York, 1974), 350.

truthful picture of real life, false only in names and dates." Keeping this in mind, the devotee of historical fiction is less likely to be conned by slipshod romantics. Indeed, the superior novelist who has integrity and some appreciation for historical veracity can contribute much to our understanding of the past. He can and does apply the power of a fertile imagination to making the Gettysburg story more real, more alive, and much nearer the reader.

To illustrate this point, let us compare two versions of Pickett's Charge, one by a skilled and scrupulous historian, Edwin B. Coddington, and the other by a creative storyteller, Joseph S. Pennell. First, Coddington's account:

The Confederate brigades moved inexorably forward . . . with almost paradellike precision. . . . A screaming shell would cut a huge swath in the line; immediately a captain would shout, "Close up, men!" and without breaking step they would move into the gap, touch elbows, and press forward.

The 3rd of July, 1863, was no day for a battle or for any form of physical exertion. At high noon the drowsy air and the hot sun beating down on the bare slopes of the ridge made men and beast long for a patch of shade and a snooze.

The first signs of faltering in the attacking forces due to the shelling and then musketry appeared in . . . Brockenbrough's weak brigade. . . . The combined fire was too much. The brigade . . . stopped in its tracks and gave up the fight.

Still, nothing seemed to stop the [other] rebels. . . . They drove relentlessly . . . greeted by a fierce fire of canister . . . took their losses and came up the slope to the stone wall.

Desperate, often hand-to-hand fighting took place before the Confederates . . . threw down their arms and were taken prisoners of war. All who could do so streamed back to their own lines, some of them still defiant and embittered, wondering what had happened to their supports.

For the first hour after the repulse . . . the Confederate army might well have been seized by unreasoning fear . . . had it not been for . . . the reassuring presence of

Coddington, Gettysburg Campaign, 504-526. In his review of Shaara's novel (New York Times Book Review for October 20, 1974, 40) Thomas LeClair writes: "I'm reading Edwin B. Coddington's 866-page 'Gettysburg Campaign' with the belief that even the best historical novel does not keep the reader within its bounds but sends him elsewhere—to history or another kind of fiction." If historical novels send readers to history, we can list another justification for them.
Robert E. Lee. . . . Lee told the men that he alone was to blame for what had happened. Few, if any, believed him, but he did restore their confidence in themselves. . . .

As these excerpts demonstrate, the historian's prose can be faultless, his word pictures dramatic, his explanation clear and convincing and above all realistic. From him we may learn what happened, why it happened, and the order in which it happened. But we see the drama from a distance as more or less detached observers in the wings. Our experience, being wholly vicarious, is but partial. It is here that the novelist is able to overcome the deficiency. In the reminiscences of Uncle "Pink" Harrington, who as a rebel soldier crossed those open fields to assail the Union center, Pennell takes us into the middle of the Confederate ranks, on the stage, as it were, and there we share at first hand the uncertainty, apprehension, bewilderment, and exhaustion—the total ordeal—that prevailed in the assaulting columns. In the pages of Pennell's *History of Rome Hanks* Uncle "Pink" tells his nephew how it was:

We got ordahs to dress on Gen'l Archah.44 It seemed like a long time since the cannonade. . . . I was thirsty for we evew stahted. . . . Wheneveh you hear about it you think of a big army, maybe on horseback, rushing across a big open space and waving their swords and firin' their muskets and hollerin' like hell—all happenin' in the clear air, so that you can see 'em. . . . Well, it wasn't like that: you couldn't see much: A good number of men walkin' in a fairly straight line across a smoky dusty field—a red-flag now and again and the line gittin' crookeder all the time.

The dust got thicker, but nothin' seemed to happen except we was going for a walk. Just a damn fool walk in the sun when we could've been lyin' under a tree asleep. . . .

I looked at Cemetery Ridge one minute and saw Yankees and guns, and I looked the next minute and saw nothin' but smoke with red far flashes comin' out of it. All of 'em seemed pointed at us. . . . That was when the heaviest Yankee musketfire started. The minnie balls

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44 Pennell tells us that Uncle Pinckney Harrington was a member of the "Eighty-sixth North Carolina." No such regiment is listed as present at Gettysburg, but Pettigrew's Brigade, which included North Carolina troops, was in a position to require it to dress upon "Gen'l Archah's" brigade.
began to whistle and the rail fence shed splinters like a sawmill. . . .

I got across the fence rails. . . . Oh, I wan't afraid now. I'd begun to git used to it. Nothin' seemed to matter. . . . Looked to me like all the Yanks' faces evah I saw that day didn't have no more expression than a turnip or a stick of kin'lin' wood. . . .

I could see a few bewildered-lookin' Confederates climbin' back oveh the wall. We started to run. . . . I stumbled oveh a dead hawse's legs. . . . We could hear ourselves panting. There wan't much musketry or cannonading now. . . . We just walked back; we couldn't run. . . . Men were coming back just like we were. They all looked bewildered. . . .

There were some officahs on hawses. . . . One of 'em in a plain shabby uniform rode out to us. He had a Vandyke beard. . . . I knew him in a minute, even if I'd never seen him before. It was Lee. Nobody could mistake him. By Gahd! You could feel him. . . .

Uncle "Pink" ends his recollection with a final statement: "That was what they called Pickett's Charge." And indeed it was, not as it comes to us in the historian's convincing narrative but as it was to a Johnny Reb who participated in that celebrated moment in history. For all his considerable skill in description, the historian cannot lead us to feel Pickett's Charge as it was felt by the nameless individuals who experienced it. Through Uncle "Pink," therefore, the novelist supplies us with a "supplementary truth" which in no way contradicts the historian's "factual truth." In doing so, he offers the broadest justification for the existence of the historical novel.

A few additional observations should be made respecting the fictional story of the Battle of Gettysburg. James G. Randall once noted that although the South lost on the battlefields of the Civil War, it has won in the publishing houses of the nation.45 Robert A. Lively disputes this notion and Daniel Aaron thinks it unimportant. But both Lively and Aaron observe real differences between Southern and Northern novelists who have dealt with the Civil War. The former concentrated on military history and, as Aaron writes, reduced the common soldier to little more than "the background for the poetry of gentlemanly action."46 Lively suggests also that

45 *Lincoln the President: From Springfield to Gettysburg* (New York, 1945), 1, 93.
Northern novelists have tended more to realism and antiwar criticism than those of Southern background.\textsuperscript{47} 

Certainly, Kantor's \textit{Long Remember} is a true antiwar novel as, to a degree, is Pennell's \textit{Rome Hanks}. Yet a Southerner such as Ben Ames Williams has James Longstreet at Gettysburg wondering (p. 967) "if politicians were set to the task of cleaning up the debris of battle . . . they would be so ready to lead a people to war." What Longstreet thought of generals who cooperate in such bloody business the novelist does not reveal.

A British literary critic has concluded that "the first historical novelist was the first man or woman who embroidered the garment of plain fact with a little imaginative lying and turned that fact into a story."\textsuperscript{48} As much truth as there may be to this acid observation, it yet remains that the historian can learn much from the novelist. For one thing, he can add color and drama to his narrative and sparkle to his prose. He can take a leaf from Bruce Catton, a journalist-turned-historian whose accounts, for all their detail, are both superb history and absorbing reading. Shelby Foote, a novelist-turned-historian put it precisely when he confessed that in his trilogy on the Civil War he had accepted "the historian's standards without his paraphernalia . . . [and] employed the novelist's methods without his license."\textsuperscript{49} Both Catton and Foote show the possibilities open to the professional historian.

The Gettysburg story still holds an irresistible appeal for historians and novelists alike. Fictional accounts of it will continue to inspire writers and draw readers. It may still be true, as Sherwood Anderson once remarked, that "no real sense of it [the Civil War] has yet crept into the pages of a printed book."\textsuperscript{50} Nevertheless, one can venture to say that the better novelists come as close as do historians in providing a credible picture of it. This historian, at least, impatiently awaits the appearance of the next fictional account of the Gettysburg battle.

\textsuperscript{47} Lively, \textit{Fiction Fights the Civil War}, 164-165.
\textsuperscript{50} Cited in Aaron, \textit{The Unwritten War}, 340. Aaron, himself, adds that "our untidy and unkempt war still confounds interpretation."