

Tears of Ink: The Civil War in Verse

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“Poetry is the lighthouse of life
Guiding the lost from a stormy sea.
Without it's presence darkness prevails
Keeping us from all we can be” (Zart).

Throughout human history, poetry has been used as a creative way to express thoughts, experiences, emotions, events, and ideas. During the Civil War, poetry flourished and many powerful and influential works were created. Many of these poems were written by ordinary soldiers, nurses, slaves, and freemen to express their experiences and emotions during the bloody duration of the Civil War. While many poets, such as Walt Whitman and Herman Melville, are well known, there were many lesser known poets who wrote poetry as well. For example, Clara Barton, a well known nurse, wrote a poem entitled “The Women Who Went to the Field” that demonstrates the typical prejudices faced by women who decided to serve as nurses. Another lesser known individual, George Moses Horton, a self-taught slave, wrote several poems about his experiences, both before and after the Civil War. But, there are many questions we should ask ourselves about the art of poetry. How do poems express the personal emotions undergone by these brave men and women? How does poetry give us a deeper understanding of those who lived during the war? Poetry written during the Civil War gives us greater insight into the experiences and lives of nurses, soldiers, and former slaves alike.

Nurses who served in the Civil War were often treated with contempt and enmity simply because they were believed incapable anywhere except the home. Clara Barton presents this prejudice in a poem called “The Women Who Went to the Field.” The first 23 lines illustrate the stereotypes of women and their incompetence in the battlefield. The men believed “That the place for the women was in their own homes, There to patiently wait until victory comes” (Barton). The next 28 lines describe the battlefield when the women had returned home. Barton delineates the battlefield with the words “Where the groans of the wounded rang out on the air That her ear caught it not, and her hand was not there” (Barton). In the last 40 lines, Barton quells the stereotypes and provides examples of the undying bravery and devotion of these women who served as nurses. She concludes with the lines, “They would stand with you now, as they stood with you then, The nurses, consolers, and saviours of men” (Barton). The nurses, though often underappreciated, were the gentle hands and strong minds that brought comfort and healing under the dismal shadow of war.

Soldiers who fought in both the Union and Confederate armies used poems to describe the events they witnessed. Poems were also written about soldiers and their lives or specific experiences. One such poem is “The Picket-Guard” (also known as “All is Quiet Along the Potomac Tonight”) by Ethel Lynn Beers. This poem describes an army camp with a lone picket guard making his rounds. He begins to think about his family and tears begin to fall. He passes by the outskirts of a forest and hears a sound in the trees. “Hark! was it the night-wind that rustled the leaves? Was it moonlight so suddenly flashing”(Beers). This was his last thought before he realizes it was a musket aimed for his heart. Beers illustrates the reaction to his death as “Not an officer lost—only one of the men. Moaning out, all alone, his death-rattle” (Beers).

From this poem, we can learn that picket guards were often shot, but their deaths were not significant to the majority of history. A similar poem was written about the death and memory of a Union private. During the Battle of Ball's Bluff, October 21, 1861, the 1st Minnesota Volunteers lost only one man; a private by the name of Lewis Mitchell. A few weeks after the battle, Mitchell's friend Hanford L. Gordon wrote "Only a Private" to commemorate his friend's death. This poem tells the sorrowful story of Mitchell's death, first shot, then bayoneted by Confederate forces. The Union chief speak gladly that it was "only a private killed"(Gordon), but the men who fought alongside Mitchell express their bereavement and mourning of their friend's demise. These poems go to show that the brave men who fought as soldiers, though usually forgotten by history, were well remembered in the hearts all those they loved.

Another category of poets were former slaves themselves. Some wrote from bondage, some after escape, and some reflecting on the war. One notable example was a slave named George Moses Horton. As a slave, Horton taught himself to read, and began creating poems and selling them. He became increasingly popular and gained the recognition of Caroline Lee Whiting Henz, a professor's wife and novelist. She helped him publish his poetry in a book called *The Hope of Liberty*. This was the first book published in the South written by an African American. He strived to purchase his freedom using his earnings from selling poems, but was thwarted again and again. He published a second book, *The Poetical Works*, while still in bondage. Following the Civil War, Horton penned more poems to comprise a third book, *Naked Genius*. He settled in Philadelphia where he lived the final 17 years of his life (Horton). One of his poems, "George Moses Horton, Myself", seems to encompass his character, particularly in its concluding line; "She like a restless bird, Would spread her wing, her power to be unfurl'd, And

let her songs be loudly heard, And dart from world to world (George Moses Horton)". This poem illustrates the binding fetters of slavery and how Horton (and other slaves) longed to spread his wings and show his true talents. Horton was one of the few slaves who refused to be suppressed by his status as a slave. He used poetry not only as a profession, but also as an escape from the malice and injustice of his reality.

Many individuals living during the Civil War used poetry to express themselves and their lives. One writer, Faith Barrett is so bold to say that the Civil War was a "Poetry Fueled War" and backs her claim with "It [poetry] was everywhere in newspapers and magazines, children were learning it in school..." (Graham). She goes on to state "there's a kind of immediacy of impact, that poetry is actually, I suggest, shaping events, not just responding or reflecting on them" (Graham). Though many may discount poetry and its significance, it will remain one of the most valuable accounts of the war, through the eyes of its witnesses.

Works Cited

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