1912

The poetry of the Civil War

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Recommended Citation

https://doi.org/10.17077/etd.ow9hjfhq

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THE POETRY OF THE CIVIL WAR.

A thesis
submitted to the faculty
of the Graduate College of the State
University of Iowa in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts.

By
Julian H. Gist.

June 1, 1912.
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In one of Charles Reade's books we find the following statement: "Gunpowder has spoiled war. War was always detrimental to the solid interests of mankind. But in old times it was good for something: it painted well, sang divinely, furnished Iliads. But invisible butchery, under a pall of smoke a furlong thick, who is any the better for that?"

The statement is interesting, though it is hard to agree with it fully. It is true that war, fought under modern conditions, has as yet given us no supreme work of art like the Greek Iliad. But whether the fact is due, as Reade suggests, to the physical changes that have come over war, is a matter that may be questioned. After all there is but one Iliad, and perhaps it was Greek imagination and Greek genius for composition, rather than the Greek method of combat, which had most to do with furnishing it. War with the rifle and cannon may be a trifle less picturesque than war with the bow and spear, and the old-time glamour of war may, in a measure, be lost. Even this is doubtful. Yet modern history goes to show that war is still a power to be reckoned with in literature; that the theme of war is still capable of poetic and artistic handling. War, when it occurs to-day, is usually prolific of literary writing, and most recent wars, like the wars of our own country, have left epitomes in the form of more or less so-called occasional verse.

A striking fact with regard to the poems of the Civil War is to be seen in the large number of separate pieces that appeared. Including in our study both the poetry that appeared contemporary with the years 1861 to 1865 and that which relates to the war but appeared
subsequently, it will be noted that the total quantity is too great for any estimate to be made of it. Several good collections of the poems have been edited. Such collections, however, merely afford specimens, and no collection aims at being comprehensive. Taken together the different volumes comprise but a fraction of the entire poetry of the war. Many of the poems will be found in the bound volumes of different magazines issued during or since the war. Others are submerged in the files of daily newspapers and transient country journals. Presumably a great many poems were composed which were never printed. During the war two several volumes of poems were gotten out by a benevolent organization known as "The Union Home and School." The second volume, which was published in 1864, contains 268 poems, all of them the work of Northern composers during the first two years of the war. In the preface the editor states that the published pieces were selected from no less than four thousand specimens which he had succeeded in gathering together. It is assumed that he means to include in this number only poems of Northern origin. We can form from this some idea of the immense number of poems that must have been composed in the North and South during the four years of the war and in post-bellum years.

In the North more poems were written than in the South. Also the Northern poems are, on the whole, of a better quality. These facts can be explained on two or three grounds. In the first place, the North had a larger population. Then the North had better educational facilities. In slavery times the South attended far less to the education of its common folk than did the North, with her traditional free school system. The South, as a result, had a comparatively high percentage of illiteracy, a fact which presented a serious obstacle to any sort of literary achievement. It is to be noted, too, that the South sent the greater part of its male popula-
tion into the army. Soldiering does not offer the best inducement to poetry. Critics have often commented on the fact that the best war lyrics are generally the work of men who are not themselves combatants. The qualities that make the poet are not the same that make the soldier, and seldom do we find a good soldier who is also a successful poet. It was not a minute-man who wrote the stirring ballad of Paul Revere's ride, but the peaceful songster at Cambridge nearly a century after the Revolution; yet Longfellow is said to have achieved more for his country by this poem than Paul Revere did by his ride. Again, there was probably less inspiration for poetry on the Southern side than on the Northern side. The North had a moral advantage over the South, an advantage due to the issues over which the war was fought. The South entered the war primarily for the purpose of destroying the Union, incidentally to maintain the slave system intact and see it extended over the free territories. Slavery, said a Southern statesman, was to be the corner-stone of the Confederacy. The North, in opposition to both principles, fought to preserve the Union and check the progress of slavery. We are not concerned here with the question of whether either side was wholly right or wholly wrong. Perhaps the South fought from as high a sense of duty as did the North. The North, at any rate, fought on better sentimental ground than did their opponents. The theme of pro-slavery was not one to inspire poetry, and few, if any, attempts were made to defend slavery through the medium of verse. Lastly, it should be mentioned that the war was fought almost altogether in the South. There could be little time for writing among a people engaged with all their powers in defending their lands from invasion. The suffering on both sides was doubtless greater than we can conceive of to-day. Yet the South had the hardships of the war impressed upon them in a way which allowed little room for poetic feeling. The North was at no time in
in real jeopardy of its life, while the South was continually so.

Most occasional poetry is the work of non-professional poets. Comparatively few of the poems inspired by the Civil War were written by persons whom we choose to rank as standard authors. True, a number of the better compositions were furnished by our leading poets, who were naturally inspired to write some things touching on the war. Thus we have Whittier's "Barbara Frietchie," Lowell's "Commemoration Ode," and Walt Whitman's "O Captain, My Captain," pieces which have become classic. But for the most part the poems were written by the great minor class of writers. Let us note some of the typical names. Thomas Buchanan Read is one. He is chiefly known by one effort, the well-known ballad entitled "Sheridan's Ride." Read was by profession a portrait painter. George Henry Boker's name is associated with a number of excellent poems, two of which are entitled "On the Hill before Centerville" and "On Board the Cumberland." Boker was a diplomat and journalist. Another name is that of a Southerner, Dr. Francis O. Ticknor. Ticknor was a practising physician in the state of Georgia, who devoted his spare time to cultivating roses and writing verses. He is known in particular for his "Little Giffen of Tennessee," the poem closing with the stanza:

"I sometimes fancy that were I king
Of the princely knights of the Golden Ring,
With the song of the minstrel in mine ear,
And the tender legend that trembles here,
I'd give the best, on his bended knee,
The whitest soul of my chivalry,
For Little Giffen of Tennessee!"

Dr. Ticknor's verses were collected after his death by another poet of the South, Paul Hamilton Hayne, who himself contributed a number of war lyrics. Hayne's best known is perhaps that entitled "Beyond the Potomac." Abram Joseph Ryan was a Southern army chaplain and Catholic priest. His poems include one, "The Conquered Banner," which fittingly and beautifully expresses the devotion of the South
to the "Lost Cause":-

"Furl that Banner, for 'tis weary,
Round its staff 'tis drooping dreary:
Furl it, fold it,—it is best;
For there's not a man to wave it,
And there's not a sword to save it,
And there's not one left to lave it
In the blood which heroes gave it,
And its foes now scorn and brave it:
Furl it, hide it,—let it rest!

"Furl that Banner--furl it sadly;
Once ten thousands hailed it gladly,
And ten thousands wildly, madly
Swore it should forever wave--
Swore that foemen's sword could never
Hearts like theirs entwined dissever,
And that flag should float forever
O'er their freedom, or their grave!

"Furl it!—for the hands that grasped it,
And the hearts that fondly clasped it,
Cold and dead are lying low;
And the Banner--it is trailing,
While around it sounds the wailing,
Of its people in their woe;
For, though conquered, they adore it--
Love the cold dead hands that bore it,
Weep for those who fell before it,
Pardon those who trailed and tore it;
And, oh, wildly they deplore it,
Now to furl and fold it so!

"Furl that Banner, softly, slowly;
Treat it gently,—it is holy,
For it droops above the dead;
Touch it not--unfold it never;
Let it droop there, furled forever,—
For its people's hopes are fled."

Now and then appeared poems which became immensely popular by reason of being set to music. "Maryland" and "Dixie" are the two songs that were most popular in the South and brought fame to their authors, James R. Randall and Albert Pike. It is an interesting fact with regard to "Dixie" that the song had its origin in the North. The author of the original song was Dan D. Emmett, a native of New England. Emmett, who had traveled with a circus, had often heard his associates express the wish, when winter was approaching, to be in "Dixie." This wish he incorporated in the words of a song, the melody of which he worked out on his violin. The song was first sung by
Bryant's Minstrels in New York, in September, 1859. Its vogue in the South began in the spring of 1861, when it was sung by a theatrical company in New Orleans. The version written by Pike appeared a year later in the Natchez Courier, and here began the history of "Dixie" as a strictly martial song. Strangely enough, the author of the second set of stanzas was also a Northern man, Pike having been born in Boston and educated at Harvard. Justly famous are the words of Julia Ward Howe's "Battle Hymn," written to the stirring tune of "John Brown's Body." Inspiration for the song came to Mrs. Howe from a visit paid to the army camp near Washington, D.C., in the fall of 1861. The song of "John Brown's Body" had already become the great war chant of the Union troops. A friend who accompanied Mrs. Howe on that day suggested that she try writing some better words for the tune. The same night Mrs. Howe rose from her bed and penned the immortal lines of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic." Probably there has not been a statelier national hymn written in any language:

"Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord: He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored; He hath loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword: His truth is marching on.

"In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me:
As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,
While God is marching on."

Unusual in the extreme were the circumstances under which Major Samuel H. M. Byers, an Iowa poet, wrote "Sherman's March to the Sea." Major Byers at the time was a prisoner of war, confined within the Confederate stockade at Columbia, South Carolina. A daily paper smuggled into the camp one chilly morning brought the gladdening news that Sherman's army had left Atlanta. To Byers came the inspiration for a song, which he proceeded to write out on a soiled bit of paper. The song was rendered by the prison glee club, and from that hour its
author was a hero among his ragged comrades. The song was taken
North by an exchanged prisoner, who concealed it in the hollow of
his wooden leg. It became at once popular and thousands of copies
were printed. General Sherman once remarked in conversation: "It was
this poem, with its phrase 'march to the sea,' that threw a glamour
of romance over the movement which it celebrates. The thing was
nothing more or less than a change of base, an operation perfectly
familiar to every military man. But a poet got hold of it, gave it the
captivating label, 'The March to the Sea,' and the unmilitary public
made a romance out of it." General Sherman later sent for Byers and
the two men formed a life-long friendship. Sherman always preferred
Byers' production to the better-known "Marching through Georgia,"
written by Henry Clay Works.

Not a few of the poems on both sides were written by native
foreigners. Some of the pieces appear in dialect form, like the one
contributed to the New York Herald by a young Irishman, Charles
Graham Halpine, who wrote it over the pseudonym of "Private Miles
O'Reilly." The author served for a time on the staff of General
Hunter, who organized the first regiment of colored troops, and the
poem is entitled "Sambo's Right to be Kilt":-

"Some tell us 'tis a burnin' shame
To make the naygers fight;
An' that the thrade of bein' kilt
Belongs but to the white:
But as for me, upon my sowl!
So liberal are we here,
I'll let Sambo be murthered instead of myself
On every day in the year.
On every day in the year, boys,
And in every hour of the day;
The right to be kilt I'll divide wid him,
An' divil a word I'll say."

Some of the poems are in the dialect of the Southern
negro. One, the "Jubilee Song," is said to have been sung by a body of negro
troops as they entered Richmond at the close of the war. George Cary
Eggleston says that this song, which might be supposed to have given
offence to the Southern whites, was instead very popular among them, and "was sung with applause by young men and maidens in well nigh every house in Virginia":-

"Say, darkeys, hab you seen de massa,
Wid de muffstash on he face,
Go long de road some time dis mornin',
Like he gwine leabe de place?
He see de smoke way up de ribber
Whar de Lincum gunboats lay;
He took he hat an' leff berry sudden,
And I spose he's runned away.
De massa run, ha, ha!
De darkey stay, ho, ho!
It must be now de kingdom comin',
An' de yar ob jubilo."

Mention should furthermore be made of the large number of anonymous authors. In one collection of pieces, which is fairly typical, as many as forty per cent. are of unestablished origin. For personal reasons many of the poems were originally offered to the papers and magazines without signature. Others doubtless became fugitive through the carelessness of publishers in transcribing them. Some of them were found on the bodies of nameless soldiers slain in battle. In a few cases a poem has either been wrongly attributed to or falsely claimed by others than the rightful author. This was true of Major Byers's "March to the Sea," also of the poem called "The Picket Guard," which is now believed to be the work of Mrs. Ethelinda Beers. Thanks to careful investigation, most of the better poems can to-day be identified.

Leaving the matter of authorship, we shall now consider the character of the poems themselves. In the main it must be said that the poems are sectional or partisan rather than national. Yet the absence of rancor in most of them is one rather remarkable trait. As a matter of fact the poems that exhibit rabid qualities are rather few in number and are confined chiefly to the first year of the war. Poets who wrote at the beginning of the struggle were apt to indulge in more or less denunciation of the other side, though frequently
such attacks were nothing more than good-natured banter or an excusable display of pride. Thus we have Holmes's famous "Brother Jonathan's Lament for Sister Caroline," written upon the announcement that South Carolina had passed the ordinance of secession—the poem which drew from a Southern writer the reply entitled "Farewell to Brother Jonathan." The poem "Yankee Pride," by General Lander, was suggested to the author by a report that the Confederate troops had said there would have been fewer Massachusetts officers killed at the Battle of Bull Run if they had not been "too proud to surrender":-

"Ay, deem us proud! for we are more
Than proud of all our mighty dead;
Proud of the bleak and rock-bound shore
A crowned oppressor cannot tread.

"Proud of each rock and wood and glen,
Of every river, lake, and plain;
Proud of the calm and earnest men
Who claim the right and will to reign.

"Proud of the men who gave us birth,
Who battled with the stormy wave,
To sweep the red man from the earth,
And build their homes upon his grave.

"Proud of the holy summer morn,
They traced in blood upon its sod;
The rights of freemen yet unborn,
Proud of their language and their God.

"Old State—some souls are rudely sped—
This record for thy Twentieth corps,
Imprisoned, wounded, dying, dead,
It only asks, 'Has Sparta more?'

It is noteworthy that the poems on the Southern side are more intense than those produced in the North. Occasionally we find an effusion like the following verses, which appeared in the Rockingham Register under the title "Call All! Call All!"—

"Whoop! the Doodles have broken loose,
Roaring round like the very deuce;
Lice of Egypt, a hungry pack,—
After 'em, boys, and drive 'em back,—

"Bull-dog, terrier, cur, and fice,
Back to the beggarly land of ice;
Worry 'em, bite 'em, scratch and tear
Everybody and everywhere.

"Old John Brown is dead and gone!
Still his spirit is marching on,—
Lantern-jawed, and legs, my boys,
Long as an ape's from Illinois!

"Want a weapon? Why, capture one!
Every Doodle has got a gun,
Belt and bayonet, bright and new;
Kill a Doodle and capture two!

"Shoulder to shoulder, son and sire!
All, call all! to the feast of fire!
Mother and maiden, and child and slave,
A common triumph or a single grave."

"The Despot's Song," by "Ole Secesh," is another curious specimen of the times:—

"With a beard that was filthy and red,
His mouth with tobacco bespread,
Abe Lincoln sat in the gay White House,
A-wishing that he was dead:
Swear! swear! swear!
Till his tongue was blistered o'er;
Then, in a voice not very strong,
He slowly whined the Despot's Song:—

"Lie! lie! lie!
I've lied like the very deuce!
As long as lies were of use;
But now that lies no longer pay,
I know not where to turn;
For when I the truth would say,
My tongue with lies will burn!"

Doubtless A. J. Requier, the author of "The Stars and Bars," believed in the assertion commonly expressed in the South that one Southerner could whip five Yankees:—

"Fling wide the dauntless banner
To every Southern breeze,
Baptized in flame with Sumter's name,—
A patriot and a hero's fame,—
From Moultrie to the seas!
That it may cleave the morning sun,
And, streaming, sweep the night,
The emblem of a battle won
With Yankee ships in sight.

"Come, hucksters, from your markets;
Come, bigots, from your caves;
Come, venal spies, with brazen lies
Bewildering your deluded eyes,
That we may dig your graves;
Come, creatures of a sordid clown
And drivelling traitor's breath.
The later poems of the war exhibit, for the most part, a contrast with those that came earlier. As the war progressed the tone of the poems became on the whole more serious, and the later efforts are characterized in general by higher emotional and better literary qualities. This statement applies to the poetry on both sides. In fact, there came to be very little distinction between the poems of the North and those of the South except in the matter of setting. Both sides in a sense forgot the issues of the war and the paramount fact came to be the war itself. Both sides felt alike and suffered alike. Thus in a poem like that of Forceythe Willson's, entitled "Boy Brittan," it would be beyond the ken of one unacquainted with the facts to tell whether the verses were of Northern or of Southern inspiration. The poem has in it no suggestion of partisan feeling. The incident related is a typical one, that of a boy hero meeting his death in battle, and the same scene was enacted thousands of times on either side. It merely happens that the author is a Northerner instead of a Southerner. The poem was written in 1862, inspired by an incident at the battle of Fort Henry. The closing stanza runs:

"O the victory—the victory
Belongs to thee!
God keeps ever the brightest crown for such as thou—
He gives it now to thee!
O young and brave, and early and thrice blest—
Thrice, thrice, thrice blest!
Thy country turns once more to kiss thy youthful brow,
And takes thee—gently—gently to her breast;
And whispers lovingly, "God bless thee—bless thee now—
My darling, thou shalt rest!"

Some one has said that the essence of history exists in its songs. The statement is well borne out in the verses with which we are dealing. If all other records were lost, a critic might almost, from a study of the war lyrics alone, reconstruct our country's history for the period from the fall of Fort Sumter to the surrender
of Lee's army. Hardly a battle or a skirmish of importance occurred in the four years that failed to result in some appropriate poem, and sometimes a number of them appeared simultaneously.

Among the first poems to be written after the actual outbreak of the war was one by Edmund Clarence Stedman entitled "The Twelfth of April." It appeared in the evening edition of the New York World, on April 16, 1861:

"Came the morning of that day,  
When the God to whom we pray,  
Gave the soul of Henry Clay  
To the land;  
How we loved him--living, dying!  
But his birthday banners flying,  
Saw us asking and replying,  
Hand to hand.

"For we knew that far away,  
Round the fort at Charleston bay,  
Hung the dark impending fray,  
Soon to fall;  
And that Sumter's brave defender  
Had the summons to surrender:  
Seventy loyal hearts and tender--  
That was all.

"And we knew the April sun  
Lit the length of many a gun--  
Hosts of batteries to the one  
Island crag;  
Guns and mortars grimly frowning,  
Johnson, Moultrie, Pinckney, crowning,  
And ten thousand men disowning  
The old flag." (Etc.)

A southern poet, upon the same event, wrote "Sumter; a Ballad of 1861." Presumably the author, E. O. Murden, was an eye-witness of the attack on the gallant fort:

"'Twas on the twelfth of April,  
Before the break of day,  
We heard the guns of Moultrie  
Give signal for the fray.

"Anon across the waters  
There boomed the answering gun,  
From North and South came flash on flash--  
The battle had begun.

"The mortars belched their deadly food,  
And spiteful whizzed the balls,  
A fearful storm of iron hailed
On Sumter's doomed walls.

"We watched the meteor flight of shell,
   And saw the lightning flash;
Saw where each fiery missile fell,
   And heard the sullen crash.

"Now ring the bells a joyous peal,
   And rend with shouts the air,
We've torn the hated banner down,
   And placed the crescent there.

"Spread, spread the tidings far and wide,
   Ye winds take up the cry:
'Our soil's redeemed from hateful yoke,
   We'll keep it pure or die.'"

A few days after the fall of Fort Sumter the country was again stirred with the news that a volunteer regiment, the Sixth Massachusetts, had been attacked by a mob in the streets of Baltimore. It was told of Luther C. Ladd, one of the soldiers slain in the attack, that he cheered the flag with his last breath. The incident called forth a ballad by Clarence Butler, entitled "Apocalypse":-

"Thus, like a king, erect in pride,
Raising his hands to heaven, he cried,
'All hail the Stars and Stripes!' and died.

"Died grandly; but, before he fell,
(O blessedness ineffable!)
Vision apocalyptical

"Was granted to him, and his eyes,
All radiant with glad surprise,
Looked forward through the centuries,

"And saw the seeds that sages cast
In the world's soil in cycles past,
Spring up and blossom at the last:

"Saw how the souls of men had grown,
And where the scythes of truth had mown,
Clear space for Liberty's white throne;

"Saw how, by sorrow tried and proved,
The last dark stains had been removed
Forever from the land he loved.

"Saw Treason crushed, and Freedom crowned,
And clamorous faction gagged and bound,
Gasping its life out on the ground." (Etc.)

Reference has been previously made to the poem "Maryland,"
written by James R. Randall. Save "Dixie," no song in the South was as popular as this one, though "Maryland" is in many ways superior as a poem. It has been called the Marseillaise of the Confederate cause. Randall, who was a native Marylander, wrote the lines while in New Orleans, upon hearing of the riot in Baltimore. The poem appeared in print the following week.

The disastrous fight at Bull Run, in July, 1861, gave inspiration to a number of pieces, among which the lines of Boker's "Upon the Hill before Centerville" are perhaps the best known:-

"For mile on mile the line of war
Extended; and a steady roar,
As of some distant stormy sea,
On the south-wind came up to me.
And high in the air, and over all,
Grew, like a fog, that murky pall,
Beneath whose gloom of dusty smoke
The cannon flamed, the bombshell broke,
And the sharp rattling volley rang,
And shrapnel roared, and bullets sang,
And fierce-eyed men, with panting breath,
Toiled onward at the work of death.
I could not see, but knew too well,
That underneath that cloud of hell,
Which still grew more by great degrees,
Man strove with man in deeds like these."

Upon the same battle, Catherine M. Warfield, a Southern writer, gave us the poem "Manassas":-

"They have met at last—as storm-clouds
Meet in heaven,
And the Northmen back and bleeding
Have been driven:
And their thunders have been stilled,
And their leaders crushed or killed,
And their ranks with terror thrilled,
Rent and riven!

"Like the leaves of Vallambrosa
They are lying;
In the moonlight, in the midnight,
Dead and dying:
Like those leaves before the gale,
Swept their legions, wild and pale;
While the host that made them quail
Stood, defying." (Etc.)

England was naturally pleased at the outcome of the battle.
A burlesque production descriptive of the way the Union forces re-
treated from the field appeared in the pages of the London Punch:

"Yankee Doodle went to war,
On his little pony,
What did he go fighting for,
    Everlasting goney!
Yankee Doodle was a chap
Who bragged and swore tarnation,
He stuck a feather in his cap,
    And called it federation.
    Yankee Doodle, etc.

"Yankee Doodle, near Bull Run
Met his adversary,
First he thought the fight he's won,
    Fact proved quite contrary.
Panic-struck he fled, with speed
    Of lightning glib with unction,
Of slippery grease, in full stampede,
    From famed Manassas Junction.
    Yankee Doodle, etc.

The state government of Missouri at the outbreak of the war was openly in sympathy with the Confederacy, and doubtless the state would have seceded had it not been for the efforts of General Blair and General Nathaniel Lyon. Lyon's untimely death while leading a charge at Wilson's Creek called forth a tribute from Henry Peterson:

"Sing, bird, on green Missouri's plain,
    Thy saddest song of sorrow;
Drop tears, 0 clouds, in gentlest rain
    Ye from the winds can borrow;
Breathe out, ye winds, your softest sigh,
    Weep, flowers, in dewy splendor,
For him who knew well how to die,
    But never to surrender!

"Rest, patriot, in thy hillside grave,
    Beside her form who bore thee!
Long may the land thou didst to save
    Her banded stars wave o'er thee!
Upon her history's brightest page,
    And on Fame's glowing portal,
She'll write thy grand, heroic rage
    And grave thy name immortal."

Our relations with England in 1861 over the Trent affair resulted in a number of humorous and satirical productions. Lowell's poem "Jonathan to John," which is included in the second series of the "Bigelow Papers," attracted much attention at the time in both countries:
"It don't seem hardly right, John, When both my hands was full, To stump me to a fight, John,-- Your cousin, tu, John Bull! Ole Uncle S., sez he, 'I guess We know it now,' sez he, 'The Lion's paw is all the law, Accordin' to J. B., Thet's fit for you an' me!' --

"Why talk so dreffle big, John, Of honor when it meant You didn't care a fig, John, But jest for ten per cent? Ole Uncle S., sez he, 'I guess He's like the rest,' sez he; 'When all is done, it's number one Thet's nearest to J. B.; Ez wal ez t' you an' me!'

"We give the critters back, John, Cos Abram thought 'twas right; It warn't your bullyin' clack, John, Provokin' us to fight. Ole Uncle S., sez he, 'I guess We've a hard row,' sez he, 'To hoe just now; but thet, somehow, May happen to J. B., Ez wal ez you an' me!'" (Etc.)

The following stanza is from an anonymous parody on Burns's "John Anderson My Jo":-

"John Bull, Esquire, my jo John, When we were first acquaint, You acted very much as now You act about the Trent. You stole my bonny sailors, John, My bonny ships also, You're aye the same fierce beast to me, John Bull, Esquire, my jo!"

By another parodist it was suggested that the English national hymn be altered to suit the times:-


Had the war been international rather than internecine, doubtless more of the poems would have assumed the form of naval ballads. As it is, there are but a small number which relate to the war on
the sea. Perhaps the best lyric of this character is that of the poet Longfellow describing the sinking of the "Cumberland" by the famous iron-clad "Merrimac":-

"At anchor in Hampton Roads we lay,  
On board the Cumberland sloop of war,  
And at times from the fortress across the bay  
The alarm of drums swept past,  
Or a bugle blast  
From the camp on shore.

"Then far away to the south uprose  
A little feather of snow-white smoke,  
And we knew that the iron ship of our foes  
Was steadily steering its course  
To try the force  
Of our ribs of oak.

"We are not idle but send her straight  
Defiance back in a full broadside!  
As hail rebounds from a roof of slate  
Rebounds our heavier hail  
From each iron scale  
Of the monster's hide." (Etc.)

Two of George H. Boker's poems, "The Sword-Bearer" and "On Board the Cumberland," deal with the same incident. The famous battle between the Kearsarge and the rebel commerce-destroyer Alabama was celebrated by an anonymous poet:

"It was early Sunday morning, in the year of sixty-four,  
The Alabama she steamed out along the Frenchman's shére.  
Long time she cruised about,  
Long time she held her sway,  
But now beneath the Frenchman's shore she lies off Cherbourg Bay.  
Hoist up the flag and long may it wave  
Over the Union, the home of the brave.  
Hoist up the flag and long may it wave,  
God bless America, the home of the brave!

"The Alabama she is gone, she'll cruise the seas no more;  
She met the fate she well deserved along the Frenchman's shore;  
Then here is luck to the Kearsarge--we know what she can do,  
Likewise to Captain Winslow and his brave and gallant crew,  
Hoist up the flag and long may it wave  
Over the Union, the home of the brave!  
Hoist up the flag and long may it wave,  
God bless America, the home of the brave!"

The most criticized man in the army in war time was General McClellan. As commander of the Army of the Potomac, he was found fault with on every side for his failure to march the troops upon Richmond when everything seemed to be in readiness for an advance. An interesting poem by Stedman, entitled "Wanted—A Man," comes to us from the year 1862 and embodies the popular clamor at that time for a new leader. Lincoln is said to have been so impressed by this poem that he read it to his cabinet:—

"Back from the trebly crimsoned field
Terrible words are thunder-tost;
Full of the wrath that will not yield,
Full of revenge for battles lost!
Hark to their echo, as it crost
The Capital, making faces wan:
'End this murderous holocaust;
Abraham Lincoln, give us a MAN!'

"Give us a man of God's own mould,
Born to marshal his fellow-men;
One whose fame is not bought and sold
At the stroke of a politician's pen;
Give us the man of thousands ten,
Fit to do as well as to plan;
Give us a rallying-cry, and then,
Abraham Lincoln, give us a MAN!

"Oh, we will follow him to the death,
Where the foeman's fiercest columns are!
Oh, we will use our latest breath,
Cheering for every sacred star!
His to marshal us high and far;
Ours to battle, as patriots can
When a hero leads the Holy War!—
Abraham Lincoln, give us a MAN!"

The familiar poem "Three Hundred Thousand More" was written in 1862 in response to the President's call at that time for more volunteers. Lincoln is said to have listened to the song at the White House one morning with bowed head. The author is James S. Gibbons:
"We are coming, Father Abraham, three hundred thousand more,
From Mississippi's winding stream and from New England's shore;
We leave our ploughs and workshops, our wives and children dear,
With hearts too full for utterance, with but a silent tear;
We dare not look behind us, but steadfastly before:
We are coming, Father Abraham, three hundred thousand more!" (Etc.)

The Battle of Chancellorsville, in May, 1863, deprived the Confederacy of one of its ablest generals, the noble Stonewall Jackson. A lyric by Henry L. Flash reflects the love and reverence of the South for its dead leader:

"Not 'mid the lightning of the stormy fight,
Not in the rush upon the vandal foe,
Did kingly Death, with his resistless might,
Lay the great leader low.

"He entered not the Nation's Promised Land
At the red belching of the cannon's mouth;
But broke the House of Bondage with his hand--
The Moses of the South!

"O gracious God! not gaineless is the loss:
A glorious sunbeam gilds thy sternest frown;
And while his country staggers with the Cross,
He rises with the Crown."

The Battle of Gettysburg inspired a number of good poems. One shall be mentioned here, the title of which is "John Burns of Gettysburg." The author is Bret Harte. The poem tells the incident of an old man, the Constable of Gettysburg, who, "in a swallow-tailed coat and battered cylinder hat, came stalking across the fields from the town, and made his appearance at Colonel Stone's position. With a musket in his hand and ammunition in his pocket, this venerable citizen asked Colonel Wister's permission to fight. Wister directed him to go over to the Iron Brigade, where he would be sheltered by the woods; but the old man insisted on going forward to the skirmish line. He was allowed to do so, and continued firing until the skirmishers retired, when he was the last man to leave." It was not the first experience for the old man in battle, as he was veteran of
two of our country's wars. His appearance upon the battlefield that
day was at first a signal for jeers, but the poet adds:-

"'Twas but for a moment, for that respect
Which clothes all courage their voices checked;
And something the wildest could understand
Spake in the old man's strong right hand,
And his corded throat, and the lurking frown
Of his eye-brows under his old bell-crown;
Until, as they gazed, there crept an awe
Through the ranks in whispers, and some men saw,
In the antique vestments and long white hair,
The Past of the Nation in battle there;
And some of the soldiers since declare
That the gleam of his old white hat afar,
Like the crested plume of the brave Navarre,
That day was their oriflamme of war."

A wealth of good verses have appeared upon Lincoln since the
war. No other name, indeed, occupies so prominent a place in our
nation's poetic literature as that of the "Martyr" President. A few
of the Lincoln poems, like the lines of Walt Whitman's "O Captain,
My Captain," have attained the rank of national classics:-

"O Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done,
The ship has weathered every rack, the prize we sought
is won,
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all
exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and
daring;
But 0 heart! heart! heart!
0 the bleeding drops of red,
Where on the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead."

The best portrayal of Lincoln in poetry is probably that of
James Russell Lowell in the Commemoration Ode recited at Harvard,
July 21, 1865. The stanzas which picture Lincoln were not, however,
composed and recited with the rest of the ode, but were an after-
thought of the author's:-

"Nature, they say, doth dote,
And cannot make a man
Save on some worn-out plan,
Repeating us by rote:
For him her Old-World moulds aside she threw,
And, choosing sweet clay from the breast
Of the unexhausted West,
With stuff untainted shaped a hero new,
Wise, steadfast in the strength of God, and true.
How beautiful to see
Once more a shepherd of mankind indeed,
Who loved his charge, but never loved to lead;
One whose meek flock the people joyed to be,
Not lured by any cheat of birth,
But by his clear-grained human worth,
And brave old wisdom of sincerity!

Here was a type of the true elder race,
And one of Plutarch's men talked with us face to face.
I praise him not; it were too late;
And some innate weakness there must be
In him who condescends to victory
Such as the Present gives, and cannot wait,
Safe in himself as in a fate.
So always firmly he:
He knew to bide his time,
And can his fame abide,
Still patient in his simple faith sublime,
Till the wise years decide.

Great captains, with their guns and drums,
Disturb our judgment for the hour,
But at last silence comes;
These are all gone, and, standing like a tower,
Our children shall behold his fame,
The kindly-earnest, brave, foreseeing man,
Sagacious, patient, dreading praise, not blame,
New birth of our new soil, the first American."

From the foregoing examples it will be seen that the poems cover a wide range of topics and present the reader with a fairly satisfactory picture of the war. It can be said of the narrative poems that as a rule they describe events in a true manner. In some cases it is true that the poet has used his imagination to make the picture stand out vividly. All poets take this liberty with their material. It may be doubted, for example, whether Read has not to an extent overdrawn the picture of Sheridan's ride from Winchester. Yet every reader of history knows that the story, in the main, is based upon fact.

Critics have often ridiculed the story of Barbara Frietchie, the heroine of the little ballad by Whittier. There are abundant reasons for believing, however, that the story is true. Whittier obtained the story in war time from a reliable source, and the poet himself always regarded the narrative as true, though he never felt
responsible for its details. That there was a venerable lady by the
name of Barbara Frietchie living in Frederick, Maryland, at the time
of the war, there is no longer the slightest doubt. For the pathetic
incident which describes how Barbara flaunted the Union flag in the
faces of rebel troops marching past her home, Whittier was indebted
to one of his friends, the well-known novelist, Mrs. Southworth, of
Washington, D. C. Mrs. Southworth had read the incident in some of
the Eastern papers and had written to some friends of hers in
Frederick to ascertain if the story were true. Her friends had
vouched for the story and given her the full details. These details
she communicated to Mr. Whittier in a letter, suggesting to him that
there might be material in the incident for a poem. Within a few days
Whittier had written the poem, which appeared in the next issue of
the Atlantic Monthly. We should expect the story, if it were untrue,
to be denied first of all by Barbara's own townspeople. Far from that,
the people of Frederick are proud of their heroine, and the site of
Barbara's old home has for some years been marked by a tablet recit­
ing her bravery. Within the past week the papers have stated that
the citizens of Frederick are now raising a large sum of money with
which to erect a monument to their heroine's name. The facts about
Barbara Frietchie have been carefully investigated, and there would
seem to be little doubt that the setting of the poem is true.

In addition to the poems arising out of historic incidents,
there is a large class of others--romantic, humorous, pathetic, and
tragic--which describe typical, often imaginary, incidents of the
war, or reflect the feelings of the people who were the actors and
sufferers in the struggle. The themes and the manner of treatment
in such poems are usually simple; yet the appeal made by them to the
reader is often eloquent. Colonel Higginson's poem, "Waiting For The
Bugle," may be noted under this class of lyrics:
"We wait for the bugle; the night dews are cold,
The limbs of the soldiers feel jaded and old,
The field of our bivouac is windy and bare,
There is lead in our joints, there is frost in our hair,
The future is veiled and its fortunes unknown
As we lie with hushed breath till the bugle is blown.

"At the sound of that bugle each comrade will spring
Like an arrow released from the strain of the string:
The courage, the impulse of youth shall come back
To banish the chill of the drear bivouac,
And sorrows and losses and cares fade away
When that life-giving signal proclaims the new day.

"Though the bivouac of age may put ice in our veins,
And no fiber of steel in our sinew remains;
Though the comrades of yesterday's march are not here,
And the sunlight seems pale and the branches are sear,—
Though the sound of our cheering dies down to a moan,
We shall find our lost youth when the bugle is blown."

Not the least interesting of the poems are those that picture
the home life of the volunteer, his enlistment and departure for the
war, and the glad reunion after four years, "When wild War's deadly
blast is blown and gentle Peace returning." Numerous tributes have
been paid to the women of the war by poets North and South. Read's
"The Brave at Home" is a good example of eulogy of this kind:—

"The maid who binds her warrior's sash
      With smile that well her pain dissembles,
The while beneath her drooping lash
      One starry tear-drop hangs and trembles;
Though Heaven alone records the tear,
      And fame shall never know her story,
Her heart has shed a drop as dear
      As e'er bedewed the field of glory!

"The wife who girds her husband's sword
      Mid little  ohes that weep and wonder,
And bravely speaks the cheering word,
      What though her heart be rent asunder,
Doomed nightly in her dreams to hear
      The bolts of death around him rattle,
Has shed as sacred blood as e'er
      Was poured upon the field of battle.

"The mother who conceals her grief
      While to her breast her son she presses,
Then breathes a few brave words and briefly,
      Kissing the patriot brow she blesses,
With no one but her secret God
      To know the pain that weighs upon her,
Sheds holy blood as e'er the sod
      Received on Freedom's field of honor!"
Eulogy of the dead is another characteristic theme. Most of the metrical pieces that have appeared since the war are in the nature of memorials for the fallen soldier. In such lyrics, almost without exception, there is entirely wanting any feeling of bitterness. On the contrary most of them express brotherhood of a sublime type. In the poems by Southern writers there is lofty resignation, while in those of Northern inspiration there is generosity toward a vanquished foe. Henry Timrod's "Ode to the Confederate Dead" Whittier always regarded as "the noblest poem written by a Southern poet":-

"Sleep sweetly in your humble graves,
Sleep martyrs of a fallen cause;
Though yet no marble column craves
The pilgrim here to pause.

"In seeds of laurel in the earth
The blossom of your fame is blown,
And somewhere, waiting for its birth,
The shaft is in the stone.

"Meanwhile, behalf the tardy years
Which keep in trust your storied tombs,
Behold! your sisters bring their tears
And these memorial blooms.

"Small tributes! but your shades will smile
More proudly on these wreaths to-day,
Than when some cannon-moulded pile
Shall overlook this bay.

"Stoop, angels, hither from the skies!
There is no holier spot of ground
Than where defeated valor lies,
By mourning beauty crowned!"

By a Northern poet, Henry Jerome Stockard, were written the stanzas entitled "Over Their Graves":-

"Over their graves rang once the bugle's call,
The searching shrapnel, and the crashing ball;
The shriek, the shock of battle, and the neigh
Of horse; the cries of anguish and dismay;
And the loud cannon's thunders that appall.

"Now through the years the brown pine-needles fall,
The vines run riot by the old stone wall,
By hedge, by meadow streamlet, far away,
Over their graves.

"We love our dead where'er so held in thrall,
Than they no Greek more bravely died, nor Gaul,—
A love that's deathless! but they look to-day
With no reproaches on us when we say,
'Come! let us clasp your hands, we're brothers all,'
Over their graves."

In general the poems elicited by the Civil War are of more
historical value than literary importance. Ballads and occasional
poems do not, as a rule, take high rank as literature, because, for
the most part, they are not the work of literary artists. Indeed,
many of the great events of history, like the Reformation and the
wars of Cromwell, have left us little or no worthy poetry. Neverthe­
less, the majority of poems of our Civil War must be said to have
a degree of merit. Criticism sometimes fails to discover the value
in a poem even when it is there. Other tests are sometimes necessary
than those of ordinary criticism. A poem may be of little value
insofar as it fails to accord with literary rules. Yet if the same
poem interprets popular feeling in a crisis like the Civil War, and
is read, recited, and sung by millions of people, it can hardly be
denied the possession of merit. Poems can hardly be studied fairly
apart from their environment and causes. Apology is unnecessary for
the poems occasioned by the Civil War. Some of them are manifestly of
a quality that entitles them to live. Said one, of Mrs. Howe's "Battle
Hymn," "It will last as long as the Civil War is remembered in
history."

In closing this sketch attention shall be called to one more
poem, "The Blue and the Gray." This poem, which has become a national
classic, appeared first in the Atlantic Monthly for September, 1867.
The author was Judge Francis Miles Finch of the New York bar. The
poem was suggested by an item in the New York Tribune which stated
that the women of Columbus, Mississippi, on their Decoration Day,
had strewed flowers alike on the graves of the Union and Confederate
dead. Some one has remarked that this poem did more than all else
that was written or spoken to restore good feeling between the North and the South. Certainly it is one of the finest expressions called forth by the war. The form of the poem is simple, while the spirit is that of the second inaugural address of Lincoln:

"By the flow of the inland river,
Whence the fleets of iron have fled,
Where the blades of the grave-grass quiver,
Asleep are the ranks of the dead:
Under the sod and the dew,
Waiting the judgment-day;
Under the one, the Blue,
Under the other, the Gray.

"These in the robings of glory,
Those in the gloom of defeat,
All with the battle-blood gory,
In the dusk of eternity meet:
Under the sod and the dew,
Waiting the judgment-day;
Under the laurel, the Blue,
Under the Willow, the Gray.

"From the silence of sorrowful hours
The desolate mourners go,
Lovingly laden with flowers
Alike for the friend and the foe:
Under the sod and the dew,
Waiting the judgment-day;
Under the roses, the Blue,
Under the lilies, the Gray.

"So, with an equal splendor,
The morning sun-rays fall,
With a touch impartially tender,
On the blossoms blooming for all:
Under the sod and the dew,
Waiting the judgment-day;
Broderered with gold, the Blue,
Mellowed with gold, the Gray.

"So, when the summer calleth,
On forest and field of grain,
With an equal murmur falleth
The cooling drip of the rain:
Under the sod and the dew,
Waiting the judgment-day:
Wet with the rain, the Blue,
Wet with the rain, the Gray.

"Sadly, but not with upbraiding,
The generous deed was done,
In the storm of the years that are fading
No braver battle was won:
Under the sod and the dew,
Waiting the judgment-day;
Under the blossoms, the Blue,
Under the garlands, the Gray.

"No more shall the war cry sever,
Or the winding rivers be red;
They banish our anger forever
When they laurel the graves of our dead!
Under the sod and the dew,
Waiting the judgment-day;
Love and tears for the Blue,
Tears and love for the Gray."