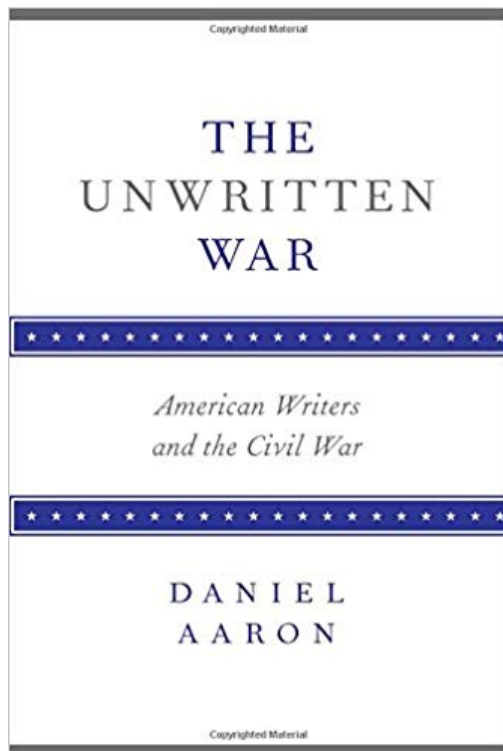


# The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War *by* Daniel Aaron



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In *The Unwritten War*, Daniel Aaron examines the literary output of American writers—major and minor—who treated the Civil War in their works. He seeks to understand why this devastating and defining military conflict has failed to produce more literature of a notably high and lasting order, why there is still no "masterpiece" of Civil War fiction.

In his portraits and analyses of 19th- and some 20th-century writers, Aaron distinguishes between those who dealt with the war only marginally—Henry Adams, Henry James, William Dean Howells, Mark Twain—and those few who sounded the war's tragic import—Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, and William Faulkner. He explores the extent to which the war changed the direction of American literature and how deeply it entered the consciousness of American writers. Aaron also considers how writers, especially those from the South, discerned the war's moral and historical implications.

The *Unwritten War* was originally published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1973. The *New Republic* declared, [This book's] major contribution will no doubt be to American literary history. In this respect it resembles Edmund Wilson's *Patriotic Gore* and is certain to become an indispensable guide for anyone who wants to explore the letters, diaries, journals, essays, novels, short stories, poems—but apparently no plays—which constitute Civil War literature. The mass of material is presented in a systematic, luminous, and useful way.



## Reviews of the **The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War** by Daniel Aaron

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As we approach the 150th Anniversary of the beginning of the American Civil War one would be hard pressed to find a subject related remotely to the war and its outcome that has not been covered by one or another Civil War buff. Needless to say the various major military and civilian figures have been covered ad nauseum. Ditto for the main military strategies and their outcomes. Hardly a skirmish in some god forsaken hollow has been left untouched. And it goes on from there. The songs of both sides, the fashions of the day, the religions of the hour, the sacrifices on the home fronts and the financial credit ratings of both sides, just to pick some random examples, have all in their turn had their day in court. Lately, as the search for new material has gotten more doggedly elusive in the face of such scarcity factors such as the army morale, soldiers' morality and the meaning of life (or the afterlife) for both sides have come in for inspection. In short, there is no lack of information about almost any facet of the struggle. Yet, this book under review, published originally some twenty years ago, concerning the way the American literary set at the time or since then have, or have not, written the definitive sage of the conflict is well worth the read, and as a very good source for further exploration on the subject as well.

Professor Aaron has taken as his thesis the notion that although the American Civil War would seem to have been a natural subject for some literary figure to attain immortality by writing the its definitive saga. He argues, for several reasons, that this did not occur, or if did it was by someone like William Faulkner who was substantially removed from any serious direct link to the struggle. Fair enough, More than one author, and here I am thinking of Norman Mailer, has broken his literary teeth trying, unsuccessfully, to write the great American novel, Thus that the same frustration may have occurred over a titanic human struggle by those who fought in or had the conflict touch their lives even indirectly does not come as a surprise. What is interesting here is the professor's extensive overview of his subject and of the structure of his argument.

The professor has divided his book in several sections that reflect various applications of his overall theme. I will not go into detail here on each section but just say that a litany of the names that he evokes form a veritable who's who of the American literary scene, some very familiar (Faulkner, James, Twain) others lost in the mist of time (DeForest, Tourgee, Cable), over the 100 years after the war (he basically ends his work after looking at Faulkner's influence). I will, taking my hints from this book, spend more time in this space later going into more depth on many of these authors. For now though it is enough to summarize the sections.

Professor Aaron starts out by looking at the literary divide first- for or against one side or the other (or an off-hand indifference, as in the case of Melville). This tends toward a not unexpected divide between hot Northern "abolitionists" and Southern "fire-eaters". He goes on to look at Hawthorne, Whitman, and the above-mentioned Melville. He thereafter gives space, but literary short shrift to the "malingerers" those who sat out the war, one way or another. Here Henry James, Mark Twain and Henry Adams get their just dessert. No one expects a literary figure to be a fighter or brave, but it helps when the subject is war, especially a war that will define a new age (successfully or not).

Actual combatant writers come under fire as well. Most of these writers are not memorable and Ambrose Bierce is the only one I have even seen anthologized. The second hand warriors are best represented by Stephen Crane His "Red Badge Of Courage", required reading in high school certainly had the grit of the battlefield down but I agree with the professor that such a narrow scope is hardly the stuff of the "great" Civil War novel. Southern writers come in for some attention, especially the now well-known name of Sidney Lanier. Part of Professor Aaron argument is an assumption that while the South lost the war it "won" the literary battle. Certainly that was true until recently on the history front on the subjects of the fate of the slave under slavery and Radical Reconstruction. I am not as sure that this premise applies on this question.

Finally, the professor ends with a look at the Agrarians, a revisionist political/literary trend that took to defending the "old regime" in the South. The names Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren (of "All The King's Men" fame) and John Crow Ransome are associated most closely with this endeavor. And of course at the tag end of that movement, although a literary force in his own right, William Faulkner who put the South, at least in fiction, back on the map. We have nothing common, as far as I can tell, politically or socially but, damn, he could write. As one can see a mere summary leads to many tempting ideas and precludes anything other than a summary to be followed up. In the meantime read this book. It is worth the time.

Maveri

This book is only incidentally about the Civil War per se and does not really contribute to knowledge about the war. The author reviews major writers from before the war until the 1920's and how they were influenced by the war and wrote about it. Their "philosophies" about the war are covered in fair detail and extensive quotations are made from the authors reviewed. The subject is very well researched by the author. Coverage of the various authors is, however, somewhat uneven. The reader cannot help but think that surely somebody could have written this study in a manner much less tedious to read.

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