

*Benjamin F. Fisher*

*The Red Badge of Courage*  
under British Spotlights  
Again

**T**hese pages provide information that augments my previous publications concerning discoveries about contemporaneous British opinions of *The Red Badge of Courage*. I am confident that what appears in this and my earlier article [WLA Special Issue 1999] on the subject offers a mere fraction of such materials, given, for example, the large numbers of daily newspapers published in London alone during the 1890s. Files of many British periodicals and newspapers from the Crane era are no longer extant, principally because of bomb damage to repositories of such materials during wartime. The commentary garnered below, however, amplifies our knowledge relating to Crane's perennially compelling novel, and thus, I trust, it should not go unrecorded. If one wonders why, after a century, such a look backward might be of value to those interested in Crane, I cite a letter of Ford Maddox Ford to Paul Palmer, 11 December 1935, in which he states that Crane, along with Henry James, W.H. Hudson, and Joseph Conrad all "exercised an enormous influence on English—and later, American writing. . . ." Ford's thoughts concerning Crane's importance were essentially repeated in a later letter, to the editor of the *Saturday Review of Literature*.<sup>1</sup> Despite many unreliabilities in what Ford put into print on any subject, he thoroughly divined the Anglo-American literary climate from the 1890s to the 1930s. His ideas are representative of views of Crane in British eyes during that era and, for that matter, views that have maintained currency to the present time.

Here's a keynote opener: "It takes [him] by the throat and keeps him motionless, horrorstruck, with great distended eyes, till the last lurid page is reached." This passage may initially suggest that the topic is a

piece of fiction by Mrs. Radcliffe or Poe, or, perhaps, one of the many parodies of Gothic fiction. In fact, it comes from an 1896 review, by "Barbara," of *The Red Badge of Courage* in *Woman*, a popular weekly from the 1890s. To give proper context for the passage, a more extended version ought to clarify. Crane's book is called

[O]ne of the most extraordinary novels of modern times. Only it is not a novel at all! It is merely an account rendered, with ruthless veracity, of a young soldier's experiences in battle. It takes the reader by the throat and keeps him motionless, horrorstruck, with great distended eyes, till the last lurid page is reached. The war pictures in Zola's *La Débacle* are milk and water beside it, and Tolstoi's *War and Peace* surpasses it only in breadth of view, a quality which Mr. Crane evidently did not aim at. The writing is extremely vivid. Take this: "The sun was a red wafer pasted on the sky." I believe Mr. Crane is an American; America has reason to feel proud of him.

"Barbara" would again acclaim *The Red Badge* not only a "startling success," but a production "that would add glory to the literature of any country." Still later "Barbara" used Crane's book as a norm against which Frank Wilkeson's *The Soldier in Battle, or, Life in the Ranks of the Army of the Potomac* (Bellairs) "reads just a little tamely."<sup>2</sup>

This early review of *The Red Badge* contains opinions which would reverberate throughout responses from the British on through the reissue as part of the collection published by Heinemann in July 1898 entitled *Pictures of War*—with an "appreciation" by George Wyndham, who had earlier commended the book in the columns of the *New Review*—and those separate appearances in 1900, one published by Heinemann in England, and in America by Appleton, this latter introduced by Ripley Hitchcock, who had read Crane's manuscript as Appleton's literary adviser.<sup>3</sup> Without great changes, many opinions found in these contemporaneous readings of *The Red Badge* still stand as eminently credible viewpoints; therefore, placing them on record is worthwhile. Critical explications of the sun as red wafer passage alone, for example, have mounted to great proportions.

Overall, British advocates of *The Red Badge* highlighted its excellence as a war novel that matched or outshined those of Tolstoi and Zola, and that ranked with Kipling's *The Light That Failed*. Indeed, a *Leeds Mer-*

cury writer thought that Crane had “leaped suddenly to fame not long ago as the Rudyard Kipling of military romance in America.” Psychological excellences also distinguished this novel from much other war fiction. Repeatedly, too, *The Red Badge* was called a “study,” a term which by the 1890s had become synonymous with psychological fiction. Close to this mode of thinking, Spencer Leigh Hughes, writing in the *Gentlewoman*, commended *The Red Badge* thus: “The reverse side of the picture of [military] glory has been given with great point and incision, vividly and lucidly described.” Apparently, one “needs the fascination and excitement of actual bloodshed to overcome the instinct of unreasoning panic which attacks the recruit when the bullets first rain about him and the cannon mow down his fellows in scores.” The story has “great descriptive power, and more than average merit.”<sup>4</sup>

Hughes also analyzed *The Red Badge* so as to align it with the increasing interest in the non-rational emotions “which impel humans to hostility, violence, and, at times, indifference toward the wounded and dying.” Just so, the emphasis on *character* instead of numerous characters meshed with a clamor *for* and accomplishments *in* brevity within novels. As is evident in the opinion of Barbara quoted above, many readers found in *The Red Badge* no genuine novel at all; instead, as if citing Crane’s own subtitle, they read it as an “episode,” another familiar literary term in the era, as was “sketch” for a brief work of fiction. *The Red Badge*, as well as most of Crane’s other work, was representative of 1890s miniaturizations in the arts. In such evaluations of the novel as these, we may detect backgrounds of the British interest in soldiery and, a related subject, the empire. Such concerns were likewise reflected, for example, in the writings of Kipling or the poems of A.E. Housman and Henry Newbolt, not to mention the continual outpourings of jingoistic verse and other writings, which highlighted imperialism and the military, in the British press. The brevity in *The Red Badge* would also have appealed to those spearheaders of the end-of-the-century efforts to do away with the ponderous triple-decker novels that had for years domineered the fiction marketplace.

Next we return to remarks earlier quoted about “vivid” writing, that is, pictorialism, in *The Red Badge*, as well as Crane’s being an American and an author of whom his nation could be deservedly proud. Such distinctions also recurred among British commentators. The Anglo-American cultural world had witnessed minglings of written word and visual art from the emergence of the Pre-Raphaelites and others, such as Laurence

Housman, Whistler, or the *Yellow Book* coterie, who on through the 1890s contributed materially to the collapsing of literary genres and combinations of literature with other arts. An example of what were then deplored as the extremes to which such new art could be taken, Stanley V. Makower's experimental novel, *The Mirror of Music* (1895) in places substituted musical scores for words to express the heroine's emotional vicissitudes which eventually ran to madness. Crane's visual effects and his fragmentary language, in *The Red Badge* and elsewhere, resemble those in contemporaneous novels like Thomas Hardy's *The Well-Beloved* (1897) or Ernest Henham's weird tale of vampirism, *Tenebrae* (1898), which many reviewers thought was incoherent, and it adumbrates such impressionistic techniques as those employed by Ford Maddox Ford, Virginia Woolf, Henry Miller or Thomas Pynchon during the twentieth century.

Moreover, Crane's being an American brought his works under another type of scrutiny from British critics who found American literature worth attention (even when they were not wholly won by its aims or methods) and, under that umbrella, what they deemed the decidedly American language features within a particular specimen. Crane's, and other Americans', language was often spotlighted by British reviewers, who were quick to point out diction and syntax imbued with what they thought were regionalisms and colloquialisms. Such attentiveness to diction and regionalisms was not confined to notices of American writings. British writers like J.M. Barrie and others, who were seen as members of the "Kailyard School" (Scots regionalist), or Edith Nesbit, whose short-story collection, *In Homespun* (1896), one of John Lane's notorious Keynotes Series volumes, was cited for its south Kentish dialect, also came in for strictures about their language. Several years later, evaluating another of Crane's war novels, *Active Service*, Desmond B. O'Brien found everything but its style enjoyable; most of Crane's "Americanisms will seem to you barbarous," he wrote, but such barbarism is a "small matter compared with the real, and sometimes dazzling, brilliancy of the novel," a compliment that might also be paid to *The Red Badge*.<sup>5</sup>

An interesting laudatory and extended notice from early 1896, which foregrounds some of the features already acknowledged, and which should not be ignored, appeared in the *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*.<sup>6</sup> First, the reviewer credited Crane with contributing "a new and important chapter in the literature of war," which supplemented those novels, by Tolstoi

and Zola, already mentioned in other notices. Tellingly, the Newcastle journalist added: "We are apt to think less of the glorious charge than of the sickening things under the hoofs." *The Red Badge* also makes us realize "how the soldier feels. The theory of the loss of consciousness in the rage of battle—of the martial inspiration that comes with the thunder of the captains and the shouting—no longer accounts for everything in the days of long-distance fighting when there is so much slow work amidst the smoke." *The Red Badge* "is a penetrating study of the psychology of the modern soldier under fire. The book does a ruthless work of disillusionment, but it is convincing at bottom. . . ." Next, Crane's expression is considered: his "style is unconventional. It tries to appear unliterary. It is plain and hard, summary and brutal. It is as if he had written, so to speak, not with a pen but with the end of a charred stick." This bit of expression very much resembled Crane's own.

Henry is, of course, the "subject of a psychological study," the "thing that looks on from within the soldier and notes everything that is passing within him and around, while the thing that the soldier knows in ordinary life as himself, works like an automaton." We in the era of the millennium may need to be reminded that stream-of-consciousness or interior monologue were, a century ago, not yet developed and refined to the degree that twentieth-century writers like James Joyce or William Faulkner were to take them, and so this contemporaneous description of Crane's methods is important. Similar effects were being singled out in some critiques of fiction by George Meredith or Henry James, among older writers, or, from the 1890s proper, by fiction from the pens of Ella D'Arcy, "George Egerton" (Mrs. Golding Bright), Gertrude Hall, or May Sinclair, to name but a few.

The Newcastle critic remarked two more imposing specifics in *The Red Badge*:

This book is full of powerful pictures. It is indubitably one of the things that influence literature; and it is safe to say that any man of brains writing about battles will write somewhat differently after reading "The Red Badge of Courage." We do not say that it contains the truth. But the unconvincing touches are very few; and it contains a very great deal of the truth.

Once again attention is directed toward Crane's accomplishments in pictorialism and in realism and, implicitly, to what has indeed proved to

be the influence of his novel. Anent this type of evaluation, we might turn to the *Yorkshire Post*, which found *The Red Badge* “a striking story of the American Civil War. It offers but a glimpse or two; and is rather a study in cowardice and courage than in anything else. But its realism lays hold of the reader, and makes him wish the author had given us more story and less analysis.”<sup>77</sup> This commentary touches on staccato effects in *The Red Badge*, as well as foregrounding its realism. Like thinking informs T.P. O’Connor’s “A Book of the Week” critique in the *Weekly Sun*, where, along with an extensive plot summary, *The Red Badge* was complimented for rousing deserved enthusiasm, adding that the “key-note” is struck on page one to bring down war to “its true, prosaic, everyday level.” Here is a “fine piece of literary work which strips the battlefield of all its false glory, and shows it in all its foulness and bestiality. . . .”<sup>78</sup> O’Connor’s concluding remark might well enter Crane’s novel into the camp of Naturalism set up by George Moore or Arthur Morrison, whose works created a ruckus among British readers and critics during the last years of the nineteenth century. Concurrence sounded from the *Leeds Mercury* reviewer of *The Third Violet*, who thought that Crane’s reputation had “been honestly won by a distinction of style and a certain dramatic realism of a remarkable kind.” Similar outlook was expressed by “Lector,” in the *New Age*, several weeks later: Noting that Crane’s work (his “good verse” was also noticed) defies tradition, he stated that the American had “revealed the utter hideousness of warfare as no writer has yet done.”<sup>79</sup>

Other evaluations were more chary in their commendation. The *Bradford Observer* viewed *The Red Badge* as an “episode of the American Civil War . . . which gives evidence of much careful work . . . but it is questionable whether an analysis of the feelings of a soldier in time of war will do more than interest a limited number of readers.” This newspaper did not review many books, and so its objectivity in measuring excellence and weakness indicates that British response to *The Red Badge* was not so consistently wholehearted as some more recent scholars suggest. Nonetheless, one wonders what the Bradford writer might think, were he writing a century later about war fiction, and had he read Hemingway, Heller, and many more fiction writers whose subject is indeed the “soldier in time of war.” In *Pictures of War*, according to the *Liverpool Daily Post*, and “[f]ar transcending the other six [sketches] in length,” *The Red Badge* is “marked by a microscopic attention to detail—analytical, indeed, almost to tediousness.” Nevertheless, “remarkable abil-

ity” is evident. Assessing the same version of *The Red Badge*, Desmond B. O’Brien stated: “The fault you would find . . . [is] that it makes its hero all eyes and ears and nerves, and that only a biograph, or whatever the camera for taking animated photographs is called, could record so many and transient and vivid pictures in so short a time. But the pictures themselves are wonderful. If they have a fault it is that of a constant and conscious strain at effect, which . . . sometimes defeats itself.” Furthermore, as I have noted elsewhere, the *Lady’s Pictorial*, no matter what accolades it accorded Crane’s books, never missed an opportunity to hit at his use of profanities. Conversely, the *Weekly Sun* reviewer thought that *Pictures of War* displayed how Crane managed “to see and hear, and record much that would escape the eyes and ears of the average soldier.”<sup>10</sup>

Whether the British found *The Red Badge* wholly artistic or guilty of blemishes, reviewers seldom failed to compare Crane’s other works with that book. The *Leeds Mercury* critic of *The Third Violet* found validity in the old saying about a cobbler sticking to his last, and deplored the falloff in “strength and imaginative form” from *The Red Badge* in the later novel. Spencer Leigh Hughes likewise deprecated *The Third Violet*: “coming from the author of ‘The Red Badge of Courage,’ this story is a disappointment,” despite its being “an original work and well put together.” Later, Hughes would measure approvingly with the same yardstick: “To say that the author of ‘The Red Badge of Courage’ has given us another of his excellent productions is the best recommendation of ‘The Open Boat.’” Kindred sentiments echo in an obituary notice in the *Daily News*, where *The Red Badge* was applauded as an intensely “realistic study of the psychology of war. . . . The book is full not only of vivid and harrowing descriptions, but of the keenest analyses of conduct and motive and emotion. Similar powers of psychological portrayal permeate “[The] Open Boat.”<sup>11</sup>

What unfolds above shows some overlooked parts of what Joseph Conrad dubbed the “noisy recognition” in Great Britain of *The Red Badge*, the book which, as the *Dundee Advertiser* forecast, “the late Stephen Crane will be remembered by . . . it remains a remarkable piece of literature, and the best example of that style of writing in which its lamented writer excelled.” Hard upon Crane’s death, the *Morning Post* reviewer of *Bowery Tales* praised *Maggie*, calling it “as admirable in its own field as ‘The Red Badge of Courage’ in another.” Certain parts of *Wounds in the Rain* also compared favorably with *The Red Badge*, a reviewer for the *St.*

*James's Gazette* believed, although the later stories did not attain the "same irresistible sequence of things, nor the pauseless, violent sweep of thought and deed which made 'The Red Badge' wonderful."

The general British feeling toward *The Red Badge* at the time is perhaps well summed up in the *Daily Chronicle* shortly after Crane's death: "There is to be a sixpenny edition of the late Mr. Stephen Crane's best-known and best book, 'The Red Badge of Courage.' Mr. Heinemann first issued this book in his Pioneer Series in the autumn of 1895. The result was the 'discovery' of Mr. Crane in the larger sense, for it means beyond all doubt that the 'Red Badge' only 'boomed' in America after it had made a hit here."<sup>12</sup> Thence we might turn, fittingly, to a critique of the Heinemann edition of 1900. There, Crane's pictorial achievements and his excellent psychological portrayals of men in battle are centralized as interlocking techniques. We are made aware, offered this commentator, of "all that passes through the mind of the lad, the ambition, the cowardice, the sinking of heart, the shame, the recovery. We begin to understand how panics arise, how battles are won and lost, and how in the stress of fight men become possessed with fierce abnormal strength, and with the passions of heroes and brutes." These observations epitomize much that was expressed elsewhere. On occasion, long after they were set forth, such century-old opinions, time and again, reveal anticipations of much that have emerged as continuing valid approaches to the work of Stephen Crane. Forty years ago Walter E. Houghton wrote that "to look into the Victorian mind is to see some primary sources of the modern mind."<sup>13</sup> What I have outlined above upholds that precept, and, I trust, contributes bibliographically and critically to Crane studies.

## Notes

1. See my "The Red Badge of Courage under British Spotlights," *War, Literature & the Arts* [Stephen Crane in War and Peace special issue (1999)]: 72-81; and my "Transatlantic Stephen Crane," *English Literature in Transition*, 42.3 (1999): 349. Ford's opinions appear in *Letters of Ford Madox Ford*, ed. Richard M. Ludwig. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1965: 248, 302. Elsewhere, Ford designated Crane as the "immensely successful author" of *The Red Badge*, noting, too that that book was a "best seller of fantastic proportions." See Ford's *Return to Yesterday*. New York: Horace Liveright, 1932: respec-



tively 66, 56; and, allowing for its imperfections in other respects, R.W. Stallman's confirmation of the great attention accorded *The Red Badge* in Great Britain, in *Stephen Crane: A Biography*, rev. ed. New York: George Braziller, 1973: 181-187. I acknowledge the kindness of Professor Donald Vanouse in offering me a forum during a session of the Stephen Crane Society in May of 1999, for the ideas expressed here. I also acknowledge gratitude to Professor James H. Meredith for encouraging my continuing explorations of the British on *The Red Badge*; and to my wife, Julie A. Fisher, for technological assistance.

2. Barbara, "Book Chat," *Woman*, 1 January 1896: 6; 26 February 1896: 6; 8 April 1896: 7.

3. Wyndham, "A Remarkable Book," *New Review*, 14 (January 1896): 30-40. The question of superiority between Appleton's 1895 version of *The Red Badge* and the version found in manuscript has continued to provoke controversy among Crane scholars.

4. "Literary Arrivals," *Leeds Mercury*, 2 August 1897: 3; Sub Rosa, "Under Cover," *Gentlewoman*, 1 February 1896: 123. Davenport Adams, in "Books and Things Bookish," *Whitehall Review*, 26 September 1896: 13-14, also called *Maggie* a "study."

5. "Letters on Books," *Truth*, 21 December 1899: 1567.

6. "In All Moods. Some Recent Novels," *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 28 January 1896: 4.

7. "Books to Read and Books to Use," *Yorkshire Post*, 4 March 1896: 6.

8. "A Book of the Week," *Weekly Sun*, 8 March 1896: 1-2.

9. "Literary Life," *New Age*, 19 March 1896: 390; cf. the *Leeds Mercury* citation in n4 above.

10. "Some Recent Books," *Liverpool Daily Post*, 2 November 1898: 7; "Fiction," *Bradford Observer*, 21 January 1896: 6. Despite this stinting portrayal, the *Bradford Observer* characterized Crane as "the author of *The Red Badge of Courage*" in reviewing *The Little Regiment*, "Literature," 2 April 1897: 6, and also quashed a rumor that Crane had died in a shipwreck. See also Desmond B. O'Brien, "Letters on Books," *Truth*, 1 September 1898: 557. O'Brien found the style in the *Pictures* overdone: "Such phrases as 'red cheers,' 'a crimson roar' (confirmatory, by the way, of the idea of that blind man cited by Locke who thought red was like the sound of a trumpet) seem forced; while there is neither dignity nor expressiveness in such images as this: 'They were ever upraising the ghost of shame on the stick of their curiosity.' I begin to despair of ever seeing the last of the misusage of 'ilk'—which means simply 'the same'—in such sentences as this: 'In battle every one would surely run, save forlorn hopes and their ilk.' This, however, is mere pedantry, and so fine a book as Mr. Stephen Crane's 'Pictures of War' is not to be judged pedantically."

See also my "*The Red Badge of Courage* under British Spotlights," cited in n1: 76; and "Pictures of War," *Weekly Sun*, 4 September 1898: 2.

11. "Sub Rosa," "Under Cover, *Gentlewoman*, 25 April 1897: 383; 30 July 1898: 140. See also the review of *The Third Violet* in the *Leeds Mercury*, cited in n4 above; "Death of Mr. Stephen Crane," *Daily News*, 6 June 1900: 7.

12. Conrad's words are quoted by Frederic Whyte, *William Heinemann: A Memoir*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1928: 170, wherein *The Red Badge* is also designated "one of Heinemann's outstanding successes in 1895. . . ." The Scottish columnist's acclaim ap-

pears in a review of Heinemann's 1900 sixpenny edition—"General Literature," *Dundee Advertiser*, 16 August 1900: 2. See also "The Last of Stephen Crane," *St. James's Gazette*, 27 September 1900: 6; "Fiction and Fact," *Morning Post*, 28 June 1900: 2; "Writers and Readers," *Daily Chronicle*, 6 July 1900: 3. The *Daily Chronicle* review might have been more tempered toward Americans on *The Red Badge*, had its author read, for example, "Books and Authors," in the *Boston Courier*, 20 October 1895: 2, the ideas in which dovetail with those in many British commentaries. Stallman cites, but does not annotate, this interesting review—*Stephen Crane: A Critical Bibliography*. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State UP, 1972: 84, note at the beginning of entries for *The Red Badge*.

13. Outlaw, "Holiday Literature," *New Age*, 16 August 1900: 517; Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870*. New Haven, London: Yale UP, 1957, p. xiv.

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