

Ambrose Bierce on the Construction of Military History

Unhappy the land that is in need of heroes.
—Bertolt Brecht, *The Life of Galileo*

Ambrose Bierce's attitude toward history is pithily expressed in his definition of this word in his *Devil's Dictionary*: “[a]n account mostly false, of events mostly unimportant, which are brought about by rulers mostly knaves, and soldiers mostly fools” (51). Bierce does not offer in this volume a definition of the word *general*; however, a reading of his autobiographical writings about his service as an officer in the Union Army during the American Civil War, as well as the short stories he based on that experience, suggests that such a definition would describe a General as a combination of the foolishness of a soldier with the knavishness of a ruler, for a frequent theme in these works is that history of the military variety is mostly false because of many generals' readiness to lie about the events of battles in order to obscure their own ineptitude.¹ In the memoir “What Occurred at Franklin,” for instance, he notes that the engagement of the title would likely have been a Confederate rather than a Union victory had the Confederates exploited a great tactical opportunity in the early stages of the battle. At this point, Bierce explains, one Union division lay isolated and exposed to Confederate attack. This force should have been annihilated, opening the way to a rout of the entire Union Army, but the Confederates permitted it to escape without even being fired upon, for reasons that will never be clear because two Southern generals told different stories, each attempting to shift the fault for this blunder to the other. Bierce reports that John Bell Hood, the commander of the Confederate Army, “declared that he gave the needful orders [for an attack on this division] and tried vainly to enforce them; [Benjamin]

Cheatman, in command of [Hood's] leading corps, declared that he did not" (64). With both officers dead at the time he writes, Bierce wryly concludes, "[d]oubtless the dispute is still being carried on between these chieftains from their beds of asphodel and moly in elysium" (64).²

Bierce is less flippant about an instance of a general's claiming credit for a victory not rightly his, largely because in this case the general had no trouble dispelling the doubts that continued to cloud both Hood's and Cheatman's disclaimers of responsibility for the defeat at Franklin. Bierce notes in a December 4, 1898, column for the San Francisco *Examiner* that the death of former union General Don Carlos Buell "[has] provoked hardly a ripple of interest" (qtd. in *Skepticism* 136) and accounts for this circumstance by explaining that thirty-six years earlier Ulysses Grant had refused to give Buell official credit for bringing his army to the rescue of Grant's shattered forces at the battle of Shiloh. Grant's motivation for this refusal, Bierce contends, was that acknowledging Buell's key role in securing victory would have confirmed the widely held, and in Bierce's view accurate, belief that the Confederate surprise attack that opened this engagement so demoralized Grant that he handled his army incompetently, rendering it little more than a mob awaiting slaughter prior to Buell's arrival with reinforcements, which turned the tide in the Union's favor. Grant's version of these events was that his army was hard-pressed by the initial attack but scarcely routed, that he himself was in complete control of his faculties, and that he had already rallied his men before Buell's forces appeared; these reinforcements were therefore welcome but not crucial.³ Grant managed, Bierce says, to shunt Buell's account aside and get his own report accepted as the official truth, thus writing a history in which he was the sole victor of Shiloh, an achievement that helped spark his rise to overall command of the Union armies and ultimately to the White House. Buell, on the other hand, stung by this denial of rightful recognition, resigned from the army and faded into obscurity (qtd. in *Skepticism* 136).

Bierce is angry enough about this mendacity to take Grant to task for it in two other pieces as well, the memoir "What I Saw of Shiloh" and the short story "An Affair of Outposts,"⁴ but he

nevertheless reserves his strongest ire for another lying Union General, Oliver O. Howard. Howard's chief tactic, Bierce explains in the memoir "The Crime at Pickett's Mill," is omission. Regarding the battle recounted here, which took place in Georgia during Sherman's advance on Atlanta, he notes that "General Howard wrote an account of the campaign of which it was an incident, and dismissed it in a single sentence; yet General Howard planned it, and it was fought as an isolated and independent action under his eye" (38). The reason for this sketchiness, Bierce continues, is that Howard was determined to bury the "crime" of the title: the fact that the chief event of this battle was his own idiotic ordering of a single brigade, of which Bierce was a member, to assault a well-entrenched position manned by four times its number of Confederates, with the result that nearly half of the 1500 men in this unit were quickly killed or wounded and the rest retreated with nothing gained in the way of ground or tactical advantage.⁵ However, despite Bierce's exposure of Howard as more prevaricator than historian in this piece, which first appeared in the San Francisco *Examiner* for May 27, 1888, Howard was named editor of *The Magazine of American History* six years later, a turn of events that drove Bierce to a still higher pitch of fulmination regarding Pickett's Mill and the "mostly false" character of history as written by such hands. "General Howard's hardihood in accentuating his connection with American history," Bierce says in the *Examiner* for October 11, 1894,

transcends the limits of human effrontery and passes into the circumcluding domain of infinite gall. This military Quaker, spirited sheeply and skilled in the tactics of confusion and the strategy of retreat, will . . . try to keep with his pen the place in American history that he won with his heels.

Moving to his specific subject, Bierce reminds his readers that

[d]own in Georgia is a little forest [Pickett's Mill] where the blood of six hundred of my fifteen hundred battlemates utters a mute demand for recognition and place . . . It took them only twenty minutes to fall, but it has taken General Howard thirty years to ignore their

hopeless heroism, and he has not finished. He was probably the only officer present who expected a different result; but . . . I am bound to confess that he has borne his disappointment with a more unfailing cheerfulness than the rest of us have felt in the memory of our fulfilled expectations.

With his accusations thus reiterated, Bierce closes this piece with still more corrosive sarcasm. Congratulating Howard on his new editorship, he concludes,

Vale, General Howard!—may you live forever! And may every unctuous smile of your life cover a warm and comfortable consciousness of your soldierly generosity in enriching American History with *one line* about the affair at Pickett's Mill. (qtd. in *Skepticism* 118)

What Bierce does not explain in these attacks on Grant and Howard, nor indeed directly in any of his memoirs or stories, is how such generals are able to keep with their pens their places in American history—*how* they get their accounts of battles accepted as the truth despite more powerfully written competing discourses such as Bierce's own or Buell's report of Shiloh, in which, according to Bierce, Buell exhibits "literary qualities of the highest order" and "immeasurable superiority [to Grant] in clarity of mind and conscience" (qtd. In *Skepticism* 136). Several recent historiographical works, however, do provide a possible answer. In *The Content of the Form*, a study of narrative discourse in historical writing, Hayden White asserts that ordinarily a specific version of events finds its place in a historical narrative, with the narrative form in turn confirming this version's "reality," because it "conduce[s] to the establishment of social order" (23). In wartime, nothing is more conducive to establishing and maintaining social order than the belief that a general is a capable, inspiring leader—that he is, in fact, a hero. Therefore, the majority is always more inclined to accept as true a discourse that reinforces this belief than one that shows a commander to be less than a great leader of men. As shown by Alan T. Nolan in *Lee Considered*, a study of the rapid accretion of heroic myths around Robert E. Lee, and by Charles Royster in *The Destructive War*, a similar

examination of the celebrity of William T. Sherman and Stonewall Jackson,⁶ the Civil War was no exception to this principle; in order to continue prosecuting the war the populace needed a belief in the absolute, unwavering heroism of its armies' leaders—what Simon Schama, regarding another general in another war, calls “the grandiloquent lie the public crave[s]” (30).⁷ Thus, in the case of Grant at Shiloh, for example, northern readers in general—and, crucially, the politicians, senior army officers, and newspaper editors whose interests lay in stoking those readers' continued enthusiasm for the war—were all more than willing to privilege Grant's own account of the battle's events, constructing an image of himself as imperturbable in momentary setbacks and able to win through to final victory by his implacable determination, over another version that revealed him to be dangerously susceptible to breakdown under the pressures of combat command.

Evidence that Bierce sees this particular interaction between reader and writer as the key to the success of Grant's and Howard's lies despite its absence in his attacks on these men can be found in one of his lesser-known short stories, “Jupiter Doke, Brigadier-General.” Probably based on an actual incident in the Union Army of the Cumberland's campaign to capture Chattanooga,⁸ this story is essentially epistolary, being structured as a collection of letters and other sorts of statements from eight people regarding the same events, the significant moments in the career of Union General Jupiter Doke. Through the separate levels of knowledge and differences in intent on the parts of various characters that these competing discourses enable him to reveal, Bierce, anticipating White, Nolan, Royster, and Schama, charts the rise of an officer whose pusillanimity on the battlefield is more than offset by his understanding that the public will readily accept any lies he chooses to tell about his combat achievements as long as he casts himself as a hero in those lies.

The story begins with a letter from the secretary of war offering Doke a commission as brigadier-general. Doke's florid acceptance, consisting chiefly of a pledge “that the patronage of my office will be bestowed with an eye single to securing the greatest good to the greatest number, the stability of republican institutions, and the triumph of the party in all elections” (734), makes it clear that he

has attained this position of military eminence not because of any martial experience in his past but rather because of his political power in his home county in Illinois; the next few entries demonstrate the full extent of his inexperience and ineptitude as a soldier. First, Doke describes honestly his introduction to combat and his terrified response to it. Notified that an artillery battery is on its way to join his brigade, Doke marches his command out of its camp at Distilleryville, Kentucky, to welcome the new arrivals at Jayhawk, three miles to the rear. However, as Doke confides to his diary,

[the battery's] chairman, mistaking us for the opposing party, opened fire on the head of the procession [revealing that only one frame of reference and its particular form of discourse have significance for him, Doke consistently describes his military experiences in political terms] and by the extraordinary noise of the cannon balls (I had no conception of it!) So frightened my horse that I was unseated without a contest. The meeting adjourned in disorder and returning to camp I found that a deputation of the enemy had crossed the river in our absence and made a division of the loaves and fishes. (737)

Doke's initial response to this fiasco, which evidently he found still more frightening than did his horse, given his parenthetical exclamation, is to attempt an escape: "wrote to the president, applying for the gubernatorial chair of the territory of Idaho" is the final sentence of this "combat" account (737). But a more rewarding course of action quickly suggests itself, as the story's next entry, an editorial from Doke's hometown newspaper, the *Posey Maverick*, reveals. This piece indicates that Doke has offered for public consumption a much different version of his first "battle," one that makes no mention of the terrors of finding himself under fire for the first time and his consequent inability to command his horse, his troops, or himself. The paper's editor proudly declares that

Brigadier-General Doke's thrilling account, in another column, of the battle of Distilleryville will make the

heart of every loyal Illinoisian leap with exultation . . . [H]is account of the strategic ruse by which he apparently abandoned his camp and so inveigled a perfidious enemy into it for the purpose of murdering the sick, the unfortunate *countertempus* at Jayhawk, the subsequent dash upon a trapped enemy flushed with a supposed success, driving their terrified legions across an impassable river which precluded pursuit—all these “moving accidents by flood and field” are related with a pen of fire and have all the terrible interest of romance. (737-38)

Doke's account might as well have “all the terrible interest of romance,” since it clearly has nothing to do with reality. What it *does* have to do with is his readers' overriding desire to see Doke as a hero and the editor's self-serving, sales-boosting willingness to satisfy that desire, both of which are evidenced most blatantly in the editor's cynical inclusion of Doke's claim about the enemy's escape over an “impassable” river.⁹ Despite such patent absurdities, Doke's construction of himself as a leader unruffled in combat effectively conduces to social order and thus guarantees the acceptance of his account as the truth. The editor follows the passage quoted above by exclaiming, “verily, truth is stranger than fiction and the pen is mightier than the sword” (738). The editor's readers miss the irony here, but Bierce's reader does not. Instead, he or she recognizes the heart of the problem in the editor's ensuing expression of delight at having been able to acquire “the services of so distinguished a contributor as the great captain who made the history as well as wrote it” (738). The editor intends for his readers to discern some level of separation between making history and writing it, but Bierce's reader grasps the full meaning of the claim that the pen is mightier than the sword, for Doke here demonstrates that history is literally *made* with the pen, not the sword.

The rest of the story further bears out the problems inherent in entrusting the writing of history to the same people who supposedly make it, for in reporting his next battle Doke demonstrates that not only can he get accounts of his own heroism accepted despite their clear spuriousness when, as in the

preceding case, they are evidently the sole accounts available, but also that, like Grant's report of Shiloh, his version will carry the field simply by virtue of its heroic tenor even when it faces specific competing discourses. Frustrated by the incompetence Doke demonstrated at Distilleryville, the secretary of war and Doke's commanding officer, General Blount Wardorg, formulate a plan to sacrifice him. Notified that the Confederates have massed twenty thousand troops just across the river from his command, Wardorg, with the secretary's approval, posts only Doke's brigade to guard against their crossing, hoping the Rebel Army will take full advantage of its superior numbers. However, this plan goes awry. Doke, having had enough of battle at Distilleryville, informs Wardorg that he has removed his headquarters to the rear, explaining that his purpose is "to point the way whenever my brigade retires" (739), and further notes that he has commandeered 2300 mules to facilitate his troops' anticipated retreat. What happens next varies widely in the ensuing reports from the generals involved. Bierce's first entry in this group is a letter from Confederate Major-General Gibeon Buxter to the Confederate Secretary of War. Buxter reports that two divisions, his own and one commanded by Major-General Dolliver Billows, crossed the river with the intention of destroying Doke's brigade and then advancing against the Federal main body, but they were "utterly annihilated" by "one of the terrible tornadoes for which this region is famous" (740), in the course of which General Billows was killed. Billows, however, is not dead, for he weighs in with a different report immediately following Buxter's. His own division is intact, Billows says, but Buxter's is destroyed and Buxter is dead, having been taken by surprise by fifty thousand Union cavalry who had learned of the Confederates' approach from a spy and secretly reinforced the single Union infantry brigade guarding the crossing (740-41). A more honest if no more revelatory account comes from a third Confederate source, Brigadier-General Schneddeker Baumschank, who commanded the force's artillery. Baumschank had just crossed the river, he explains, when "somedings occur, I know nod vot it vas—somedings mackneefcent, but it vas nod vor—und I finds meinselluf, afder leedle viles, in dis blace, midout a horse und mit no men und goons" (741).

That Doke offers still another version of what that “somedings” was, neither tornado nor cavalry, is apparent in the next entry, a resolution of Congress recommending Doke’s promotion to Major-General and thanking his brigade for their “unparalleled feat of attacking—themselves only 2000 strong—an army of 25,000 men and utterly overthrowing it” (741). As Doke pins on his second star, Bierce concludes the story with the statement of another witness who, since he is not a general, may be more readily trusted to explain what actually happened than Billows, Buxter, or Doke. In the words of Doke’s African-American servant, Hannibal Peyton,

Dat wus a almighty dark night, sho’, and dese yere ole eyes aint wuf shuks, but I’s got a year like a sque’l, an’ w’en I cotch de mummer o’ v’ices I knowed dat gang b’long on de far side o’ de ribber. So I jes’ runs in de house an’ wakes marse Doke an’ tells him: “skin outer dis fo’ yo’ life!” An’ de lo’d bress my soul! Ef dat man didn’ go right fru de winder in his shir’ tail an’ break for to cross de mule patch! An’ dem twenty-free hunerd mules dey jes’ t’nk it is de debble hese’f wid de brandin’ iron, an’ dey bu’st outen dat patch like a yarthquake, an’ pile inter de upper ford road, an’ flash down it five deep, an’ it full o’ confed’rates from en’ to en’! . . . (742)

The fact is, then, that the Confederates were routed by a mule stampede set off by the terrified Doke himself, which this general has written into a fearless attack by his brigade, presumably with himself at its head. (Another presumption we may make, noting the discrepancy between the 20,000 Confederates reported to Wardorg and the 25,000 appearing in the congressional resolution, is that Doke in his report has inflated his foe’s numbers by twenty-five percent, doubtless to add a finishing touch of grandiloquence to his lie.) The reality of these events is at least initially recoverable, Bierce implies by including Peyton’s narrative, but since this account lacks a heroic leader, as do Buxter’s, Billows’s, and Baumschank’s, it, like them, has no place in the official accounts; instead, Doke continues his military rise thanks to the public’s readiness to give credence to his literary

construction of himself as a paragon of coolness under fire and in the face of impossible odds. "The real war will never get in the books," Walt Whitman once observed (112), and indeed that is the case here, but if this idea bothers Whitman, Bierce, and—we hope—their readers, John Hood, Benjamin Cheatman, Ulysses Grant, O. O. Howard, Jupiter Doke, and their readers would not have it any other way.¹⁰ In view of this fact, perhaps Bierce is actually mistaken in calling soldiers "mostly fools" in *The Devil's Dictionary*; such men are unquestionably knaves, but their credulous, hero-craving audiences seem ultimately more deserving of the designation fools. □

Notes

1. Bierce's early biographer Adolph De Castro (ne Danziger) is not completely reliable, as Carey McWilliams and Richard O'connor demonstrate in their later biographies of Bierce, but his comments on this subject are nonetheless worth noting. De Castro claims that Bierce was still in the army when he began these attacks, which took the initial form of letters from the field to his hometown newspaper, the *Warsaw [Indiana] Commercial*, that caustically denounced those among the army's commanders whom he found unfit. The paper's editor chose not to run most of these, De Castro says (8), but he identifies those that did find their way into print as the probable cause of Bierce's failure to be promoted beyond first lieutenant and brevet major when a considerably higher rank would have been more commensurate with his formidable abilities and services; De Castro calls him "the real hero of Missionary Ridge—the mental fighter who planned the attack and helped to carry it into effect with a fierce abandon" (10). De Castro asserts that no less a personage than Ulysses Grant was responsible for this official neglect, having been a frequent target of Bierce's invective, and he contends further that Bierce's postwar attacks on Grant, discussed below, constituted Bierce's revenge (12-13).

2. For discussions of the relative merits of Hood's and Cheatman's claims, see Cox, *Battle of Franklin* and *March to the Sea*; Hay; Hood; McDonough and Connelly; and McMurphy.

3. Dozens of books and articles have examined the controversy between Grant and Buell; judicious discussions are to be found in McDonough, McFeely, and Sword.

4. Compared to his attack on Grant in his eulogy for Buell, Bierce's remarks in "What I Saw of Shiloh" are relatively mild. He simply notes that in the face of a large Confederate force Grant "established his army, with a river in his rear and two toy steamboats as a means of communication with the east side [Grant's army being on the west, the same side as the Confederates], whither General Buell with thirty thousand men was moving to join him from Nashville," and lets the strategic errors in this disposition speak for themselves (13). In "An Affair of Outposts," however, Bierce is even more outspoken than in Buell's obituary, ascribing the Union losses on the first day of the battle to Grant's "manifest incompetence" and lamenting that Grant's command was not given to Buell after this engagement, since the army "had been saved from destruction and capture [only] by Buell's soldierly activity and skill" (174).

5. Howard's reasons for giving this order are obscure, as are those of General Thomas Wood, the commander of the division of which Bierce's brigade was an element, who first proposed the attack. Bierce admits that Howard and Wood had no way of knowing how many Confederates occupied the entrenchments and that they may have intended the assault as a way of ascertaining the enemy's strength; but in his eyes the decision to use only one brigade in this situation manifestly demonstrates the two generals' lack of military acuity regardless of their motives, for he asserts that any capable field officer would have seen that the difficult terrain and the extent of the Confederate entrenchments alone indicated that a far stronger force was required for any kind of effective operation. Referring to the Confederates' large numbers, Bierce says, "true, we did not *know* all this [emphasis added], but if any man on that ground besides Wood and Howard expected a 'walkover' his must have been a singularly hopeful disposition" (42).

6. See especially Royster's analysis of the construction of the public persona of Stonewall Jackson on pp. 68-78.

7. The general under Schama's consideration is James Wolfe, the commander of the British army that defeated the French on the plains of Abraham outside the city of Quebec in 1759, effectively ending the French and Indian war and securing France's North American territories for Britain. The "grandiloquent lie" here is Benjamin West's highly romanticized 1770 painting of Wolfe's death at the end of this battle, which makes the moment much more heroic than do the eyewitness reports of Wolfe's subordinates, upon which several earlier, more accurate paintings had been based. "Wolfe must not die like a common soldier under a bush," Schama quotes from West's writings. "to move the mind there should be a spectacle presented to raise and warm the mind and all should be proportioned to the highest idea conceived of the hero . . . A mere matter of fact will never produce the effect" (28).

8. Bierce biographer Richard O'Connor identifies the source of this story as the effort of the "vainglorious" Union General Joseph Hooker to claim a victory for

himself in one of the engagements of this campaign when in fact the Confederates facing his force were broken up and routed by a stampede (215).

9. Evidence that Bierce intends the editor to be cynical rather than simply as credulous as his readers comes from two sources. The first is Bierce's assertion that many of his own letters to the *Warsaw Commercial* criticizing certain generals as incompetents never ran because the editor "suppressed them for the benefit of the incompetents" (qtd. in De Castro 8). The second is his vividly unflattering definition of *editor* in *The Devil's Dictionary*, which characterizes this figure as one who "spills his will along the paper and cuts it off in lengths to suit" while listening obediently to "the voice of the foreman demanding three inches of wit and six lines of religious meditation, or bidding him turn off the wisdom and whack up some pathos" (28).

10. Students of military historiography may wish to consider whether any other author-generals, from antiquity to the present, are worthy of addition to this list.

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