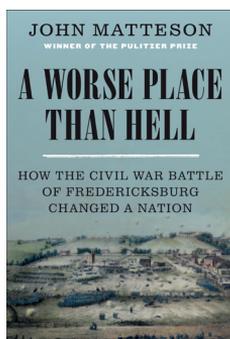




A WORSE PLACE THAN HELL HOW THE CIVIL WAR BATTLE OF FREDERICKSBURG CHANGED A NATION

by John Matteson

(A Pre-Publication Book Review)



An academic love song of America. America's scholarly *Bildungsroman*. A pure-hearted gesture denuding America's vices, yet a soaring act of her utmost redemption. John Matteson's personal pledge of allegiance. To properly classify the text herein discussed, the list of academic genres would have to be expanded beyond the limits of what 'traditional' scholarship, so heavily dependent

on strict disciplinary divides, would be ready to accept. *A Worse Place Than Hell* resists any attempts at unambivalent categorization—its academic rigor and historical trustworthiness notwithstanding, the book reads like an excellent novel. Being a scholarly, psychohistorically inclined, monograph, it is also a multifaceted and multilayered masterpiece of 'life-writing,' in which biographies of its main protagonists are inextricably intertwined with the biography of the country, or perhaps—more precisely—of the faith-based initiative that has made America what it is at its best and at its worst. In the author's own words,

This book is part of the much larger story of a country that, diseased by slavery and sectional anger, broke apart and was then refigured and reborn. However, it is more concerned with the personal than the political. It tells the stories of five Americans and the paths they fol-

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lowed during the latter months of 1862. This book follows each of the five from the Battle of Antietam in September of that year until—and in most cases well beyond—President Lincoln’s signing of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. It speaks of the different ways in which each of them came face to face with the pain and slaughter of war and how each was transformed by the ordeal. The destinies of all five were brought together by the Battle of Fredericksburg in the second week of December 1862. The first of the five [—a young Captain of the US Army, a Harvard graduate and a son of an eminent poet and academic, was to emerge from the war with a vision of life whose keenness would far surpass that of his eminent father] [...]. For the second, a slender, graceful young artillery officer from Alabama with a preternatural eye for terrain, the fall of 1862 would be a season of exhilaration, culminating in a day of audacity and glory that would durably link his name with the adjective “gallant.” During these months, a third man, a poet whom the early months of war had depressed into sullen silence, would spend many evenings in a Manhattan cellar, gazing at the follies of beer-soaked bohemians. Then he would read in the newspaper accounts of Fredericksburg that his brother had been wounded. Seeking him there, the poet would also recover his own voice and would use the sights and sounds of war to rephrase the meaning of America. Still another figure, a man of God from an illustrious family, would wrestle with mortality, as his passions for abolition and personal vindication pushed his frail body toward its limit. The transformation that Fredericksburg and its aftermath would work upon the final member of the five, a self-described literary spinster from Concord, Massachusetts, was to be perhaps the most powerful of all. Rejecting the life of passivity to which her sex and social station might normally have consigned her, she would fling herself into the fight to save the Union and, in so doing, would nearly die. But, in coming close to losing everything, she would find a courage and a creative gift that would change the face of American literature and its perceptions of womanhood. (Matteson 2021: 15)

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Even to non-experts, such descriptions (perhaps with one exception) make it relatively easy to recognize those whose lives provide the canvas for an all-encompassing reflection upon America coming of age:

Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., John Pelham, Walt Whitman, Arthur B. Fuller, Louisa May Alcott: some of the names still resonate; others have fallen partly or wholly into obscurity. But if these five had not lived, or if the calamity of Fredericksburg had never touched their lives, we would now inhabit a different nation. Beyond argument, other battles bore more heavily on the outcome of the Civil War. Viewed militarily, Fredericksburg was merely one in a series of Union blunders that tested the will of the Northern states before the tide eventually turned and the nation was preserved. As a matter of cultural significance, however, no battle of the war surpasses Fredericksburg. Through

its impact on the thinking of Holmes, it modified the theory of American jurisprudence. Had Alcott never tended the wounded of Fredericksburg, it is unlikely that *Little Women* would ever have been written. Whitman, America's most indispensable poet, later claimed the war was the fact of his life that shaped him more than any other, and it was Fredericksburg that drew him into the war. Though less well known, the gallant Pelham became a unique icon in the Confederate mythos. More than any other figure in the war, he came to epitomize the hyacinthine Southern hero, blooming early and dying young. More obscure than any of the others, Arthur Fuller offers not so much a cultural legacy as an enduring parable: a story of a man whose skills suited him best for peace and piety but whose destiny instead awaited him in war, and whose response to that destiny effaced the line between sublime courage and pitiable folly. (Matteson 2021: 15)

While the excerpts above offer an apt, albeit succinct, summary of John Matteson's perspective on the(hi)story formative to America's present, perhaps the most striking and, at the same time most alluring, aspect of the book is its affective power. This is so, because—thoroughly researched as it is, and offering a plethora of new information—*A Worse Place Than Hell* is Romantic in its provenance. Thus, uncharacteristically of the academic genre, it does more than to confront its audience with the facts of American history. (It is, one might add, part of Matteson's alchemy that the facts he offers can be simultaneously deeply gratifying and hauntingly disconcerting and uncomfortable.) Rather, by granting this history a human face, the book places any perceptive reader face to face with his or her own traumas, projections, and hopes. Therefore, not unlike the major texts of the Romantic canon, the book cannot be reduced solely to its descriptive dimension; the outcomes of the reading process extend far beyond the mere expansion of one's academic knowledge.

Matteson's narrative's strength lies chiefly in its author's sensitivity to the worldmaking potential of language—and to the impotence of language in the face of the ineffable immediacy of experience. Always loyal to historical evidence, the writer masterfully attunes his reader into resonance with a plethora of subtle undertones of emotion emanating from letters, diaries, or reported conversations of his *dramatis personae*. Without compromising his methodological rigor or meticulous adherence to detail, Matteson uses his pen to awaken empathy. He transforms the reader

into an emotionally engaged sharer of the dilemmas faced by the actual actors of the events that transitioned America into adulthood. Sometimes baffled, frequently incensed, often moved, occasionally disgusted, but, beyond doubt, never neutral—the book’s audience gains an opportunity to enter the ranks of the community of the “kingly commons,” as Herman Melville would perhaps describe them¹. Attuned to emotions that transcend time and space, the “kingly commons” find common ground with the book’s heroes both in their shared human condition and in their concern about self-definition, their nation’s future, or the ethics transcending partisan interests.

Thus the novelesque composition of the book turns Matteson’s historical account into a gripping tale, involving its audience in a complex, winding journey, retracing the paths of the five individuals, whose lives would find their nexus at Fredericksburg’s battlefields, but also a journey of a nation at a historic crossroad. The volume is divided into five sections identified as “books.” The first two explore the backgrounds and motivations of the protagonists “on their way” to Fredericksburg. Their dilemmas and the universal ideals of youth—still untarnished by the reality of war—mirror the unrest and struggle of a nation not yet a century old, marching toward the decisive moments that would define its future. It is the tale of adolescence, setting the scene for the clash that will inevitably and irrevocably transform everyone and everything.

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1. “If, then, to meanest mariners, and renegades and castaways, I shall hereafter ascribe high qualities, though dark; weave round them tragic graces; if even the most mournful, perchance the most abased, among them all, shall at times lift himself to the exalted mounts; if I shall touch that workman’s arm with some ethereal light; if I shall spread a rainbow over his disastrous set of sun; then against all mortal critics bear me out in it, thou just Spirit of Equality, which hast spread one royal mantle of humanity over all my kind! Bear me out in it, thou great Democratic God! who didst not refuse to the swart convict Bunyan, the pale poetic pearl; Thou who didst clothe with doubly hammered leaves of finest gold, the stumped and paupered arm of old Cervantes; Thou who didst pick up Andrew Jackson from the pebbles; who didst hurl him upon a war horse; who didst thunder him higher than a throne! Thou who, in all thy mighty, earthly marchings, ever cullest Thy selectest champions from the kingly commons; bear me out in it, O God!” (Melville 2017).

Book Three presents a visceral experience, bringing into focus the brutality of war through the eyes of all five of its central characters. Gradually unveiling the dramatic events of the Battle of Fredericksburg as Holmes and Pelham face their struggles on the opposite side of the conflict, it highlights the horrors of the aftermath through the haunting imagery of Alcott's and Whitman's entries into hospital service. Through Chaplain Fuller's heartrending decision to lay down his Bible and pick up a gun, the narrative also raises implicit questions about the ethics of crafting one's own destiny. The mounting suspense of the masterfully woven narrative transports the reader, body-and-soul, into the minds of the protagonists, making it only natural to share in their fears and joys, triumphs and anguish. The story reaches its climax in the resolution of the battle of Fredericksburg followed by the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation: two transformative moments that have already—or would soon—claim blood sacrifice.

The *dénouement* in Books Four and Five brings the protagonists' wartime experience to a close, plunging each of them into a reality undeniably different from the world that they left behind when they departed home to report for service. Book Four sublimates Alcott and Whitman as literal and metaphorical "nurses" of America, who, sacrificing their health and personal well-being, acquire tangible and figurative scars—a particular badge of courage that would mark their post-war literary endeavors. Book Five breaks off the parallels between Holmes and Pelham, setting the former on the path of a blossoming career while the latter's brightly burning flame is prematurely extinguished.

Holmes observed that soldiers in the American Civil War were "touched with fire." Matteson's epilogue reveals that "touch" as a deeply searing brand, highlighting the profundity of the war's impact on each of the three surviving protagonists as they attempt to settle into their post-bellum lives. And as the three survivors must face the necessity of finding their role in a battle-transformed country, America herself must redefine its identity and purpose, both internally and in its relation to the whole of humanity.

A Worse Place Than Hell comes into view in a peculiar moment of American history. At the very instant that Matteson has

articulated his vision of a good and durable republic, thugs and miscreants have tried literally to dismantle the bastions of American liberty and justice. It, therefore, seems important to observe that Matteson's title is simultaneously a powerful metaphor of the mind-boggling dilemma faced by Abraham Lincoln—responsible for the future of millions in the middle of the war that changed the world—and a literal reference to all battlefields and a military hospitals in human history, the first-hand experience of which irreversibly transforms individuals. In the wake of the experience of combat, children become “parents” to their own mothers and fathers, idealists turn into existentialists, cowards into heroes, and heroes into dust. The timelessness of *conditio humana*, once profoundly understood, may form a fundament for ethics embracing the natural human need of kindness and solidarity. A universal “squeeze of the hand,” as Melville would put it, is the only remedy against the universal “thump” we all experience (Jędrzejko 2009)². Such knowledge changes one's optics: it motivates individual heroism, but also, transforming foes into brothers, becomes the motor of change.

In recent years, the United States has been striving to once again become *e pluribus unum*. Fractured by unresolved problems, divided by partisan interests, misguided by the egotism of irresponsible individuals in the positions of power, and perhaps above all undereducated—the United States has become for many of its own citizens a bitter disappointment. And yet, like John Matteson, many of them also understand America's unique regenerative powers, and they realize that the nation's future

2. The concept of the “universal thump” is introduced in the first chapter of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*: “[...] however the old sea-captains may order me about—however they may thump and punch me about, I have the satisfaction of knowing that it is all right; that everybody else is one way or other served in much the same way—either in a physical or metaphysical point of view, that is; and so the universal thump is passed round, and all hands should rub each other's shoulder-blades, and be content” (Melville 2017). The idea of the “squeeze of the hand” is the overarching metaphor and the title of chapter 94 of the novel. Both these concepts provide Paweł Jędrzejko with a framework of reference upon which the scholar reconstructs the essentials of Melville's existentialist ethics (Jędrzejko 2008; 2009).

depends on the essential moral fiber of the “kingly commons.” It depends individual Americans, at once both compassionate and self-reliant, of the kind who took personal responsibility to rebuilt their country from the ashes of the Civil War, and who strive to rebuild her today.

No doubt, America has been redeemed before. In “The Custom House,” his famous quasi-biographical introductory to his *Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote:

[...]I know not whether these ancestors of mine bethought themselves to repent, and ask pardon of Heaven for their cruelties; or whether they are now groaning under the heavy consequences of them in another state of being. At all events, I, the present writer, as their representative, hereby take shame upon myself for their sakes, and pray that any curse incurred by them—as I have heard, and as the dreary and unprosperous condition of the race, for many a long year back, would argue to exist—may be now and henceforth removed. (Hawthorne 1850)

Written 170 years later, *A Worse Place Than Hell* redeems America again—for the sake of those who would unwittingly seek to destroy it, and above all, for the sake of the generations to come.

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