

***The Red Badge of Courage* in the Context of the 1890s**

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So vivid and affecting were Stephen Crane's depictions of battle in his 1895 novel *The Red Badge of Courage* that many readers assumed the book must have been written by a soldier. One veteran even claimed, "I was with Crane at Antietam." It was a remarkable myth to spring up around a young man of twenty-four, who had been born six years after the Civil War ended. Crane had seen no battlefield nor had he ever been a civilian during a time of war. The Civil War belonged not to his own generation but to that of his parents. Yet Crane's novel would become the definitive representation of this war—and, indeed, one of the best novels to depict any war. Crane so powerfully evokes the hardships of camp life and the horrors of battle that it is easy to forget that he did not experience these realities firsthand. The novel is often read and taught as a quasi-historical document, a faithful record of the war that divided the nation in the 1860s. In survey courses, it is often held up as the definitive example of Civil War literature. Yet *The Red Badge of Courage* is also a novel of Crane's own time and is informed by some of the social and cultural developments of New York City in the 1890s: immigration, industrialization, the rise of the tenement and the factory, clashes over labor conditions, an increasingly militant national mood and foreign policy, and the emergence of the unsentimental literary movement known as naturalism. Understanding something of both Crane's personal history and the larger historical forces that shaped the nation in the 1890s can broaden one's understanding of the scope and importance of Crane's great novel.

Growing up in the wake of the Civil War, Crane had several formative experiences that would contribute to his realistic portrayal of war. Born in Newark, New Jersey, in 1871, Crane was named for an ancestor who had fought in the Revolutionary War. Crane's father, a Methodist minister, died when Stephen was eight years old, and subse-

quently his mother wrote for religious journals to support the family. For a time the boy lived with one of his adult brothers; later he joined his mother in Asbury Park, New Jersey. Crane, who was already writing stories and essays of his own, often helped his mother by doing research for her articles. Despite—or because of—growing up in a strictly religious family, Crane was a rebellious and irreverent youth. An indifferent student, he preferred playing baseball and writing his own stories to doing his schoolwork. As an effort to provide Crane with a more stable and disciplined environment, his mother sent him to Claverack College, a military academy.

While Crane was not particularly successful at his military school, and would eventually leave without receiving a degree, he loved the martial environment of the place. He would later call his time at Claverack “the happiest period of my life.” Though he often skipped classes to play baseball, Crane seemed to take the school’s rank system seriously. He was drawn to the uniforms and titles that figure so prominently in a military school’s ethos and for some time considered pursuing a career in the military itself. Crane’s fascination with the military was also evident in his lifelong interest in war stories. He grew up surrounded not only by veterans of the Civil War but also by an ever-multiplying body of work representing that war. Crane’s relationship to military culture and to the legacy of war is a fascinating one. He came of age during one of the most peaceful stretches of American history, for the United States waged no wars between the end of the Civil War in 1865 and the start of the Spanish-American War in 1898. Crane might well have sympathized with Henry Fleming, the protagonist of *The Red Badge of Courage*, who believes “there was a portion of the world’s history which he had regarded as the time of wars, but it, he thought, had been long gone over the horizon and had disappeared forever” (3). But whereas Fleming’s understanding of war is drawn from Homer, Crane’s is drawn from stories of the war that his father’s generation had waged. Crane spent “the happiest period of [his] life” in an environment of sanitized, formalized militarism. The veterans of the