

Making Sense of the Civil War

Overview

Making Sense of the Civil War is designed to present sesquicentennial programming that probes meanings of the Civil War that are “hidden in plain sight” behind the key questions and main characters so familiar to us. Program participants may be surprised to encounter in the readings such a large cast of characters, so broad a range of perspectives, and so dense a web of circumstances. After considering the vast sweep and profound breadth of Civil War experience, readers will understand that the American Civil War was not a single thing, or a simple thing. And yet they will also see emancipation—the end of the most powerful system of slavery in the modern world—take its place as the central story of the war.

The texts include works of historical fiction and interpretation, speeches, diaries, memoirs, biographies, and short stories. Readings also include an introductory essay, which provides context for the entire *Making Sense of the American Civil War* series and for each of the five sessions. The essay was written by the national project scholar who devised this project: Edward L. Ayers, President of the University of Richmond, historian of the American South, and digital history pioneer. Professor Ayers also selected the reading materials and topics of conversation for the program.

Imagining War March – Part One by Geraldine Brooks

Twenty five people gathered for our first conversation in the Civil War series. Our library has restored hours and we no longer meet in isolation - bravo! We have had great interest in this series. People attended who have not come for book discussions before and we had several men in attendance. Thanks to the Humanities Council for bringing this series to our state. Everyone was so glad to have read MARCH. I began by asking why they thought Dr. Ayers began this series with a novel. Several folks jumped in, commenting that fiction allows the author to explore universal truths - the wastefulness of war, the

impact on families, how war appears to be an inevitable part of human experience. Fiction allows us to inhabit the lives of the author's characters. The discussion then moved on to an exploration of the characters' motives, demons, hopes and dreams. I brought out Brooks' use of Louisa May Alcott's father, Bronson, and the similarities between Bronson and March. Readers were eager to discuss Marmee and a good debate ensued as to gender roles then and now. Some thought that Marmee was unrealistically drawn - too much of a modern woman. We discuss Grace, particularly her loyalty to the Clement family. This point is exactly the type of conversation that does NOT occur in history books, that loyalties are complex, often divided, and may, indeed change over time. So, too, beliefs change. Witness March himself. And what of Mr. Canning? Didn't he change? And why was Zeke loyal to southern ideals? On we went.... Who fought? Were they poor boys, committed to the cause of their side - or not? We got into buying a substitute, a subject we will revisit. The discussion of causes of the war began and we will visit this again as well. There is no way to talk about the Civil War without talking about more recent wars and we did that over and over again. We ended by my asking what the group thought the future held for the March family. There was disagreement here, but most people thought that the road ahead would be a difficult one for Marmee and March. We did, incidentally, discuss Alcott's brief period of work in the Georgetown hospital. Here again gender roles as well as class roles were apparent. And no wonder Grace told March to go home - in part to get out of the "pestilence box!" It was an enthusiastic discussion and I think meeting frequently (Oct. 1 is next) will help to maintain interest. Most people talked during the evening, but the problem of a group this size is that it allows people to sit quietly and some did. I know we will be smaller next time as some snowbirds are heading south early. We're looking forward to our next interesting conversation.

Barbara Gose

There were 43 attendants for the first session of the Civil War Series. Though there were so many in attendance, we managed to stick to a large group discussion for the whole hour and 20 minutes.

There are always struggles when a group meets for the first time. Much of the time before the discussion was spent trying to figure out the specifics of the series (the books to be read, the schedule of the series, why some people had books and others didn't, etc.). I am hoping this will not be such a concern next time.

I opened up the session by talking about the authors, as well as their literary connections. I also took a few minutes to outline the basics of the Civil War in relation to the session's readings. This helped make sure that we were all on the same page going into the discussion.

When I first opened up the conversation, we began by discussing *truth* in relation to the novel. Is it important to share the struggles of war with your family/loved ones? If so, how much should you share? Many audience members connected with this on a personal level because

they had either fought in a war or were a wife of a man who had fought. There was a diverse perspective between men and women on this issue. Most of the men who spoke up seemed to believe that you have to protect your family from the cruelties of war, while women believed that they had a right to know/understand what was happening to the men that they loved while they were fighting in battle.

This smoothly transitioned into March's character. We discussed the struggles March, being a white, educated, abolitionist, faced. Many members of the audience talked about the fact that March is naïve and doesn't really understand what he is signing up for. The scars of war last much longer than the battles themselves, which is something March doesn't seem to consider until it is too late.

We then addressed Grace's character. What was her role in the novel? What was her role in the Civil War? This sparked an interesting conversation about stereotypes. Why would such a strong, black female be a pivotal character in the novel? We then circled this back to our previous discussion of truth; many were more offended by March's secret lust for Grace than they were about the fact that he is withholding information about the war.

We ended the conversation by discussing Alcott's journal. We discussed the differences between men and women's roles in the war, and what that meant for both genders. Are there similarities between Marmee and Alcott? Are there similarities between Grace and Alcott? We also looked at the differences between Alcott's journals and March's letters.

Our next session is October 18.

Shannon McKinzie

On Friday, August 17, 8 of us assembled at the Baggs Library to discuss March, by Geraldine Brooks, as our introductory work in the Civil War series. March is based upon Louisa May Alcott's Little Women, which provides the foundation for Brooks' novel. It follows the experiences of Peter March, the beloved and absent father in Little Women, as he volunteers to go as a chaplain with the youth of their community to war, and by doing so, humanizes not only his character, absent from his girls and wife, but also fleshes out Marmee, his wife, making her a more believable woman. March commits himself to war upon an inspiration, a whim really, without consulting Marmee who then is left behind in poverty to support their four daughters alone.

We are introduced to March as he retreats from the Battle of Ball's Bluff in Virginia. The novel is in first person, with almost all the novel told from his point of view, with only the last few chapters narrated by his wife. Exhausted and troubled in mind by the atrocities of war and his own failing, he wanders onto a plantation he once visited as a young man, occasioning flashbacks into his earlier experiences on the plantation as a young peddler of

wares, the slave children he tried to teach to read, resulting in a nasty beating of the beautiful young slave woman who introduced him to them. The flashbacks lead us into his earlier life, his friendships with the Thoreaus and the Emersons, his courting of Marmee, in her youth an activist abolitionist and supporter of the Underground Railroad. All of March's early life is characterized by the idealism that brought him and Marmee together, and led him to donate his fortune to John Brown's cause, leaving his family in principled penury.

Eventually March is badly injured and taken to hospital in Washington, DC., where Marmee comes to nurse him, and the narrative shifts to her point of view, which is effective in helping us understand how March's idealism has led him to disappoint his wife, adding layers of miscommunication, frustration, and anger to their relationship, and complexity to their characters. Marmee, angry and frustrated, is no longer then sweet patient mother of Little Women, but she is more realistic and interesting. Peter March's abolitionist sympathies and idealism have led him into war's horror; when, within it, he doesn't perform to his heroic expectations, and he becomes understandably conflicted, frustrated, and depressed. One of our readers found his less-than-heroic character frustrating and unsympathetic, but it is realistic. Usually in life, people aren't heroes and are conflicted. March helps us to better understand the ravages of war on imperfect humans.

Participants enjoyed the novel, although some found March's ineffective idealism frustrating. Many of us had read Little Women, and talked about the way in which the two novels interacted, and how March deepens the characters of the earlier novel. We discussed his infatuation with Grace, the young slave woman whom he meets again later in the novel and whom he idealizes and romanticizes. His relationship with Marmee is undermined by his idealistic but false assumptions that she shares his every thought and urge. As the first book in the Civil War series, March imaginatively introduces us to the human devastation as well as national disaster.

Mary Kay Solomon

A few Wednesdays ago, we met at the Natrona County Public Library for our first night of the Making Sense of the Civil War reading series.

There were ten participants – four men and six women. I began by introducing myself, and then I talked about some of the background and goals of the series.

Since most of the participants had just picked up their books for the series, there was only one person in the group who had read Geraldine Brooks' novel, March. I decided to discuss some of the issues surrounding the causes and effects of the war, but I avoided an in-depth discussion of the book itself. I suggested – and the group agreed – that we should talk about March next time.

I showed "The Meteor" clip from the first part of Ken Burns' The Civil War, and invited the group to discuss slavery's role in bringing on the war. The clip takes its title from Herman Melville's poem, "The Portent" (you can find the text here:

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/12384/12384-h/12384-h.htm>)

I mentioned John Brown's role in March, and after some discussion about Brown and his life, we broadened our thinking to include slavery and the start of the war. There was some disagreement over slavery's role in bringing on the war, however. More than one person held that the war was rooted in deep economic differences, of which slavery was more of a symptom than a cause. The discussion was warm and lively – several members of the group identified themselves as Southerners, and they animated the debate with their firmly held perspectives. At one point one of the non-Southern group members joked that in the South the war is still called "The War of Northern Aggression."

I then asked the group how slavery continued to affect our country, and we found ourselves in some complex territory, with a couple of participants bringing up inner-city life, welfare, and economic dependency. Here again there was some disagreement about how slavery

helped to perpetuate challenges that many African Americans continue to face. Some group members said they thought that African Americans simply needed to overcome those challenges, while others surmised that the culture of slavery— with its prohibition of education and its tendency to sunder families – had sweeping, multi-generational consequences. I brought up Milton and Rose Friedman's idea of "equality of opportunity,"

and asked if slavery had made equality of opportunity impossible for some African Americans. Someone said that equality of opportunity was impossible for some whites as well. Another participant chimed in that there are people of all races who continue to live as slaves in the United States.

Not wanted to go too far into contemporary slavery, I showed a trailer for the mockumentary, The Confederate States of America, and asked for reaction. It was mixed. One or two of the participants seemed confused about the film's intent. Even though I had explained the film's attempt at satire, it was clear that the clip had made a few people uncomfortable.

From here, we went on to talk about war's continuing influences on American life. One participant brought up The Reconstruction and the ways it punished and limited the South. We talked about economics and the hard work of reconciliation.

I asked whether making sense of the Civil War could teach us useful lessons for today. And building on that, I asked, "Are we in danger of fighting another civil war?" I mentioned our growing political polarization, the media's division of the country into red states and blue states, and what seems to be a growing resistance to compromise.

In the Ken Burns clip, Shelby Foote was asked what caused the war, and he said, "we failed to do the thing we really have a genius for, which is compromise." There was some interesting discussion – some participants agreed that the lessons we learn from the war carry more than mere historical value.

Before adjourning, I went over a few iracism, loyalty/fidelity, gender roles, power (and wealth), and faith. I also handed the group a packet of poetry that included three poems by Whitman ("Vigil Strange ...", "The Wound Dresser" and "Reconciliation"), four poems by Melville ("The Portent," "Ball's Bluff," "Shiloh," and "The College Colonel"), one poem by Dickinson ("My Portion is Defeat") and a

fragment of Stephen Crane's "War Is Kind." I said that they would

encounter the battle of Ball's Bluff at the outset of March, and that some of the other poems would be useful later in the series.

We adjourned around 8:00 pm. – Patrick Amelotte

February 19, 2013 in Worland, 10 attended
February 20, 2013 in Basin, 11 attended

The "Understanding the American Civil War" discussion groups in Basin and Worland are going well. As we had hoped, men signed out the books and are half the attendees. In Basin, one is a hard-of-hearing Vietnam Era vet who tended to interrupt and ramble, but I was able to jump in and get the discussion back on track. We all wore name tags including the vet's black Pomeranian named Wiggles, which is a trained as his service dog to help him hear.

I asked the people to introduce themselves and describe their interest; e.g. do they have an ancestor who was involved in the war. This tactic worked well in Worland. In Basin, however, our hard-of-hearing fellow started with an opinion. Everyone else followed suit, having brought something to say. I had asked each group to consider questions 2, 4, 5, and 6 from the back pages of *March*, but the discussions were so lively our time was over before we knew it.

A real Civil War buff will be at the next Basin meeting. He thought *March*, a historical fiction, was a "soap opera," so he didn't show the first night. A few other men intensely disliked Mr. March and didn't finish the book. They weren't persuaded by his decision to lie to his wife to spare her the horrors of what he was experiencing. I pointed out that Geraldine Brooks says she is approached by current military wives who say their husbands do they same, and they spare their husbands local bad news, often making it hard to reconnect when they return home. All the women appreciated the book, and were willing to understand and discuss Mr. March's moral failings as typical experiences of war.

I send out emails between meetings, the latest to encourage everyone to watch the movie "Lincoln." Following is the evaluation by Gary W. Gallagher, a

leading Civil War historian from University of Virginia. He says it now his favorite CW movie since "Glory," and that it portrayed President Lincoln accurately and well. <http://www.cavalierdaily.com/article/2013/02/u-va-faculty-goes-to-the-movies-gary-gallagher-on-lincoln>. The people of Connecticut are dismayed with Spielberg about portraying their representatives as voting against the 13th amendment while, in fact, they voted in favor. The screenwriter says it is "historical fiction" and this order of voting worked better dramatically. I say harrumph.

I also sent out a list of additional resources.

Video:

Ken Burns *Civil War* PBS series,
Glory about a black regiment,
Lincoln, about pushing through the 13th amendment before war's end.
Teaching Company DVD series called the *American Civil War* by Gary W. Gallagher.

Books:

Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln, by Doris Kearns Goodwin.
Bruce Catton's *Mr. Lincoln's Army*, *Glory Road*, and *A Stillness at Appomattox*, and others.

Fiction:

Uncle Tom's Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe, the most significant novel in the history of America.
The Red Badge of Courage by Stephen Crane
Absalom, Absalom! by William Faulkner
Beloved by Toni Morrison

Biography:

My Bondage and My Freedom by Frederick Douglass
With Malice Toward None: The Life of Abraham Lincoln by Stephen Oates
Collected Black Women's Narratives ed. Anthony G. Barthelmy
Judah P. Benjamin: The Jewish Confederate by Eli Evans
Portraits of American Women ed G.J. Barker-Benfield and Catherine Clinton

Rebirth of a Nation:

Two Roads to Sumter by William & Bruce Catton
Ordeal by Fire, Volume II: The Civil War by James M. McPherson
Reconstruction: After the Civil War by John Hope Franklin
The Private Mary Chesnut: The Unpublished Civil War Diaries edited by C. Vann Woodward

Website:

The Valley of the Shadow: Two Communities in the American Civil War <http://valley.lib.virginia.edu/>

Claire Dunne

Nine of us met on the campus of Eastern Wyoming College on 3/4 to discuss *March* in our first full meeting for the Civil War series in Torrington. Before we dived into a full discussion, we had a talk about what we had learned about the Civil War in our educations, particularly what

was taught to us at a young age. For instance, I remember learning in high school that the Civil War was explicitly not about slavery, but about economics and states' rights. Other participants recalled similar lessons, although some of the older members also recalled that slavery was taught as an integral cause of the war. Several participants also recalled their teachers "drumming into their skulls" that the Civil War was the greatest horror a country could visit upon itself, because of the way that brother killed brother, families torn apart, a nation killing its own citizens. We talked a little bit about the movie *Lincoln*, and how it was important for the North not to consider Southerners as citizens of a belligerent nation, but as rebels to the United States. That made reconciliation and reconstruction after the war much easier. Those of us that had seen *Lincoln* wondered just how historically accurate the movie was, and chuckled at what a consummate politician Lincoln was. His façade of being a simple farmer masked a master political operative.

Also before discussing the book, we watched the first part of a mockumentary that purported to be about what life here would be like if the South had won the Civil War. The entire mockumentary is worth watching if you have time (it's available for free in its entirety on YouTube), but the first part, especially, linked below, is pretty shocking. Imagine the Marines on Iwo Jima raising a Confederate flag instead of the Stars and Stripes, and the flag planted on the moon being a confederate one, and slavery persisting into the 20th century. Here is a link to part one - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EViGaTSngRw> This would be useful at any part of this series, I think.

Our discussion of *March* turned on the explicitly moral argument the book lays out, while at the same time muddying the waters to show that no one, really, came away from the wrenching experience of the Civil War clean. We also discussed how idealism is actually the source of so much conflict, how the uncompromising idealists both North and South led tens of thousands of soldiers to their deaths. At the same time, we considered how the Civil War was a rich man's war, especially in the South, where rich plantation owners who owned hundreds of slaves rarely participated in the combat, preferring instead to send poorer men, most of whom did not own a single slave. We also talked about how in the South it was important that white people be "pure," that is, not have a single drop of black blood, but in reality, there was so much intermingling of races that probably nearly everyone in the South was mixed to one degree or another, as we saw in the character of Grace Clement. We also talked about the moral façade of Mr. Clement, who was seemingly educated and kind, but in fact pimped his own daughter out to his own son, as well as having her cruelly punished for the crime of allowing a slave girl to learn to read. No one mentioned that they had any trouble getting to the end of this book; the story was moving and engaging. We talked about the appearance of all the famous people in the book, John Brown, Thoreau, Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne. We talked about a "woman's place" in the 19th century, and how Mr. March's wife certainly did move under those restrictions. All in all, we found this a good book to begin our discussion of the

Civil War, and are looking forward to moving on with the series.

Court Merrigan

Making Sense of the Civil War: Albany County Public Library, Session 1: Imagining War
2/14/13 @ 7pm

Our first meeting of "Making Sense of the American Civil War" at the Albany County Public Library was well attended (roughly 26, including Jack, a very large and sweet dog) and lively. There is nothing like violent death and destruction to get a group animated on Valentine's Day.

We arranged the chairs in a large circle, and Kathy Marquis had powerful scenes from the Drew Gilpin Faust documentary on "Death in the Civil War" showing in the background. After Kathy's welcome and introduction, I said a few words about me, and the goals of the group. I offered some brief background on the novel *March* in relation to Louisa May Alcott's life and her own novel *Little Women*, and outlined the questions and topics that interest me most about the Civil War: in particular, the legacy of slavery.

We then went around the room for introductions. I asked everyone to share their name, as well as any connection to or particular interest they had in the Civil War. We had a quite a few relatives of Civil War veterans in the room! Most notably, these included Charlene, whose Georgia grandfather fought for the confederacy, and who still wonders "why?" so many individuals, families and communities paid such a high price: for what? Charlene has a lot of stories to share and will be speaking to the group about her grandfather at the final session.

After introductions, I began with one of the open-ended questions included in the supplement to the novel: did *March* change your view of the Civil War? People immediately began remarking on how the main character, March, changed his view of the war dramatically from beginning to end. This sparked a larger discussion of whether and how March himself grows and develops over the course of the novel (and of course whether or not we like him as a character). The room seemed split: some believe that, by the time March returns home, he has accepted that being a father is "enough," that he can move forward despite what he sees as his appalling failure to live up to his high ideals. Others felt that March returns to Concord a wreck of a man who will remain forever haunted—and alienated from his family—by his traumatic wartime experiences.

Most readers seemed to really enjoy the change in perspective from March to Marmee, and we had a nice conversation about their relationship and their differing perspectives. We also discussed the character of Grace (perhaps not in as much depth as I would have liked, but the conversation definitely had a life of its own), as well as how well this novel does or doesn't "fit" with *Little Women*. Most felt that *March* seems an entirely different animal, but I think in the end we could see how the experiences

Brooks imagines for March show what might have been beneath the happy veneer of childhood innocence that marks Alcott's novel.

By the end of the evening people really wanted to get back to the overarching theme of the Civil War: what were its causes (economic, racial fear, resources, western expansion of the nation)? What effects do we still feel today (in the north, south, and west)? Here some of our history buffs got a chance to go toe-to-toe. Since our next unit focuses on "Choosing Sides," I concluded with the observation that this note of contention at the end of our time was fitting.

In all, I would estimate that 60-80% of those in attendance offered a comment during discussion, and no one voice dominated. However, the acoustics in the room made it difficult for some participants to hear. We are going to try turning off the heat at the start of the next session in the hopes that this will help and not make the space too uncomfortable.

Erin Forbes

Seventeen people gathered at the Powell Branch Library to discuss "March" by Geraldine Brooks as part of the Civil War reading series. The group largely enjoyed the book. We discussed many themes and ideas. We began the evening discussing and debating historical fiction—this book traces the life of March from Louisa May Alcott's "Little Women." Brooks imagines March's life from letters and journals by contemporaries of Alcott, namely people like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Bronson Alcott. We discussed the notion of what can be true in fiction and what is imagined in non-fiction. We also discussed how successful she was as a female author imagining a man's perspective and we also discussed how male authors imagine and write from a female perspective. We discussed the context of the Civil War, especially issues like slavery, emancipation, separation from family, and the general conditions of war.

Choosing Sides America's War: Talking About the Civil War and Emancipation on their 150th Anniversaries – Part Two Anthology edited by Edward L. Ayers

We had 18 to 20 (I counted rather quickly) present tonight for discussion number two. This set of readings focused on the arguments for and against secession. While the institution of slavery is important, it's apparent that the status of the union is most important in these essays. I developed a timeline of events leading up to (causes of) the Civil War and we discussed them as they seemed appropriate. It's helpful to remind ourselves when things happened - the Fugitive Slave Act, Harper's Ferry, etc. We began by how Lincoln viewed slavery in his Inaugural

Address. This led into a discussion of how abolitionists, slaveowners, and other southerners viewed slavery. As a result of this discussion we proceeded to talk about slavery seen as the "cornerstone" of the United States and the various justifications deployed for the institution of slavery. Lincoln's plea in his first inaugural was that the union was inviolate. We then examined the relationship among the people, the states, and the national government during the 19th century, especially the theory of nullification and the role of South Carolina and John C. Calhoun. As we looked to Thoreau's defense of John Brown, we reexamined the March family's role in the abolitionist movement. As readers commented on Douglass' passionate 4th of July speech, I asked how they felt southerners would have reacted to both Thoreau's and Douglass' comments. The short time since the American Revolution played a role in people's reactions to the buildup toward war. Some southerners viewed our early political history as justification for secession, others, like Lincoln, saw this history as argument for unity and national power. Our discussion moved back and forth among the readings. We found the flowing language hard at times. Douglass' use of language was impressive. All in all, reading these mostly primary sources provided an immediacy that textbooks cannot offer. Oh, and we had a robust argument about Lee's decision to support Virginia's secession. If he had been more outspoken would Virginia been more likely to stay in the union? How would that have affected the war that came? What if Lincoln had chosen not to resupply Fort Sumter? If the War hadn't happened, what would have become of slavery? Would the relationship of states to the national government been resolved? How? We are on to discussion three in three weeks.

Barbara Gose

There were 23 attendants for the second session of the Civil War Series. We stuck to a large group throughout the course of our discussion.

Those who attended seemed much more prepared to participate in discussion this time around. Attendants had marked pages and passages that confused or intrigued them in some way. They also had questions of their own written down, which they would then share with the whole group. Even though there were differing opinions and ideas about these readings, as well as their interpretations, people were polite, courteous, and respectful when discussing the various issues this set of readings brought up.

We started out by discussing Frederick Douglass' speech and what it meant for pre-Civil War America. The first part of the conversation focused on Douglass' discussion of America's forefathers. Why would Douglass use this to connect to the audience? What about his rhetoric during this portion of the speech encourages change and invokes emotion? We then transitioned into Douglass' discussion of the 4th of July. What is this holiday supposed to represent and what did it actually represent? Much of the audience seemed to really enjoy and connect with this reading.

Our discussion of Thoreau's writing focused mostly on John Brown and his role in the War, as well as his overall role in America's history. The group seemed to split during this discussion; one side believed he was necessary and "good," and one side believed he was monstrous and cruel. We also continued our discussion of Transcendentalism, which began when we discussed *March*. This, then, connected back to Thoreau as an author and advocate. We finished by talking about Thoreau's comparison between Brown and Jesus, which, again, offered diverse interpretations and responses.

When discussing Abraham Lincoln's "First Inaugural Address," we focused mostly on the Constitution. Because the Constitution does not outline every scenario, it becomes a product of interpretation. We discussed the issues this could bring up when discussing something as serious and abolition. We also talked about Lincoln's rhetoric and how he connects with his audience. He takes on a serious, reassuring tone.

Alexander H. Stephens' piece was definitely the focal point of our conversation. We discussed science in relation to Stephens' argument. We also talked about Stephens' bringing religion into his justification. At this point, though, we kind of broke away from the content of the reading and focused on the emotions writing/speech like this brings up. Many were willing to share their thoughts, ideas, emotions, and fears associated with this piece. I was amazed at each individual's ability to eloquently discuss these various issues.

We briefly discussed Montague and Stuart's writings. We highlighted the points made by each author for either secession or remaining in the Union. People seemed less excited about these two pieces.

Much of our discussion about Robert E. Lee focused on his relationship with Virginia. This sparked a conversation about the differences between one's relationship with their state and one's relationship with their country. We noted that this relationship was different during this time because it seems that people had stronger ties with their state during this time than we do now. This sparked some interesting interpretations when thinking about an individual's choice to support the war (whether they supported the North or the South) or not.

We did not discuss Mark Twain's writing.

We discussed gender (obviously!) when looking at Sarah Morgan's piece. What did it mean to be a Southern woman? How did they feel about the war? We focused specifically on the fact that she, too, wanted to fight alongside her husband. We decided that many women probably felt this way. We also talked about the fear civilians felt when facing the war, which was in their own backyard.

Overall, I believe we discussed many of the important points and aspects of these various texts. Attendants seemed more willing to participate and more spirited about

their contributions to the conversation. I expect Session Three will be even better.

Shannon McKinzie

Three ladies met in Baggs on Friday afternoon, September 21st, to discuss several documents relating to the Civil War. We were competing with football games, visiting family, trips overseas, and a completely beautiful fall day, all of which seemed to reduce our membership. Nevertheless, we had a far-ranging and stimulating discussion of the documents and politics today as well as those of the Civil War era.

The selections we covered included Abraham Lincoln's first Inaugural Address, a pro-Abolitionist Fourth of July speech by Frederick Douglass, speeches to the Virginia House both for and against secession from the Union, an essay concerning Robert E. Lee's famous decision to resign his commission and secede with his state, and an essay by Mark Twain describing his brief enlistment in the War. All of them were fascinating selections. We discussed Douglass's background as a slave and how he taught himself to read. His ability to read, as well as his inherent strength and courage, enabled him to free himself and become a major player in the politics of the Civil War. His masterly Fourth of July speech first celebrates freedom then shows why the slaves cannot participate in that celebration. He brings out the inherent conflict of slavery in a nation celebrating freedom. Lincoln's First Inaugural Address shows clearly his desire to make peace and bring the polarized segments of his nation together. It was an excellent springboard to a discussion of today's political polarization and the upcoming election. Other factors today, as in Civil War times, include incivility and an inability to communicate or work together across political lines. The First Inaugural also clearly shows Lincoln's masterly way with words and rhetoric, so amazingly expressive. We talked about Virginia's fragmentation, the concerns of the Virginia speeches, and its effect on Robert B. Lee and his decisions. Participants brought up the divisions and conflicting needs of regions of the country today, and how that affects politics and commerce. It was a fun and enlightening discussion. We closed with Mark Twain's humorous, yet at its center deadly serious, account of joining, actually killing a soldier, and high-tailing it from the army. We ended by discussing the on-going effects of the Civil War today, not only on the south, but throughout the country, individual, family, and regional. This is an excellent series and helps us to see today's problems more clearly, as well as understand Civil War times.

Mary Kay Solomon

For our second meeting of "Making Sense of the Civil War" in Casper, we had a smaller group – six people, including myself, all men. I was concerned about our attendance, worried that perhaps our last discussion had put a few too many "burrs in belief systems." But even the community's initial interest in the program seemed underwhelming. I'm not sure how to account for it.

At our first meeting, so many of our attendees had only just picked up Geraldine Brooks' novel, *March*, that we elected to do double duty, discussing *March* and the Week #2 readings, too, if possible at this meeting.

I began our discussion of *March* by referring the group to the poetry packet that I had handed out on our first night. In it, we read Melville's poem, "Ball's Bluff," and began talking about the opening scenes of the novel. I mentioned that according to Tim O'Brien, (author of *The Things They Carried* and *Going After Cacciato*) a true war story is one that "makes your stomach believe." One participant said he thought the juxtaposition of the battle and March's earlier memories of the plantation to be compelling. He suggested that the plantation was a microcosm of the nation before and after the war.

Our conversation initially centered on *March* and his character. I asked the group to discuss his best qualities and a few of his flaws. None seemed as bothered by him as I was. Despite his good intentions, I found him to be obnoxious and difficult, but the group was much more charitable. Certainly, his flaws allow Grace to shine.

We went on to discuss Marmee and her relationship with March. In so doing, I asked if complete honesty could have changed their circumstances for the better. I followed up by asking if there are times when it's better to withhold some truth. One of our participants, a man who identified himself as a Vietnam veteran, replied that he thought it was best not to tell all the truth in war. He said that in his letters home from Vietnam, he often kept his family from knowing about the things he saw and did. He mentioned a few of the battles he was in – battles notorious for their bloodshed and difficulty – and the other participants asked him questions about his experiences.

I think that this kind of sharing, while tangential, is rare and valuable. I stopped worrying about keeping the discussion on its track. We listened intently, as if this man's story were the thing we'd come to hear.

Eventually, we came back to discussing the book. We talked about emblematic names. We talked about Grace. We examined her commitment to the emblematically (if somewhat ironically) named Mr. Clement and explored the impossible complexities of her situation. Could her attachment be some kind of Stockholm Syndrome, or is that too simple when one is the child of her captor?

Next we examined March's rubric for moral greatness: "Moral greatness means little without actions to effect the moral end." I asked the participants if they agreed with March. Is it a "faith without works" kind of statement? We talked about how well March lives up to his idea – how moral greatness becomes "clouded and murk-stained when dragged out onto the field of actual endeavor" – but then we took it further and looked at John Brown. Do Brown's actions change the way we view moral greatness? Is moral greatness different from moral perfection? Or, perhaps, is achieving "moral greatness" mere folly, an act of ego? D.H. Lawrence has a thing or two to say on that matter, by the way.

From there we moved into the idea of March's ideas on "just war." March says that just war is "action for a moral cause with the most rigorous of intellectual underpinnings." But does that mean that many (or perhaps most) of those who fought for the Union were fighting an unjust war (at least until The Emancipation Proclamation)? And what, exactly, does March mean by "rigorous intellectual underpinnings"? We decided that not unlike Stephen Crane's Henry Fleming, March carries an unenviable naivete.

I asked, "What do you think about how *March* portrays slavery?" It's a big question. One participant mentioned that life on the plantation almost seemed better under slavery than under the businessman, Mr. Canning. We talked about the complexities Brooks suggests when she juxtaposes the slave master with the "business" master.

We finished our discussion of *March* with some consideration of the irreparable wounds of war. Marmee's contention that "the world will not help me put back together what war has broken apart" inspired us to talk about our most recent combat vets. One of the group members suggested that war is an intensely personal experience, and as such, it's difficult to know how and to what extent many vets are "broken apart." I asked if perhaps we send our troops off to war with unrealistic expectations of what they'll see and do, not to mention how those things will affect them afterwards. We talked about the influences of recruiting commercials, video games, and war films, but the group determined that despite ways the popular culture looks at war, every generation has to re-learn the lessons learned by their forebears. Writing about anti-war films in *Jarhead*, Anthony Swofford points out that troops tend to miss the anti-war message – it's as if only the experiences of combat can speak with the proper authority.

Since we were doing double duty this week – handling two sessions' of readings – I tried to segue our thoughts on *March* into a look at Thoreau's "A Plea for Captain John Brown." Our conversation centered on Brown's failures, and his great charisma despite those failures. We recalled Melville's poem, "The Portent," which we had discussed in our first meeting.

Next, we contrasted Douglass' "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July" to Stephens' "Cornerstone Speech." Specifically, we looked at Douglass' arguments on pages 27-28 and Stephens' arguments from the middle of page 53 to the bottom of page 55. At least one group member said he was struck by Douglass' command of rhetoric – the group wanted to know more about him. Another group member pointed out the irony of Stephens' points on page 53: "All fanaticism springs from an aberration of the mind – from a defect in reasoning. It is a species of insanity. One of the most striking characteristics of insanity, in many instances, is forming correct conclusions from fancied or erroneous premises ..."

It was likewise useful to compare and contrast Douglass with Montague (pp. 66-67). The group noted Montague's sweeping generalizations about the North – "a union of the masses ... to strike down an institution they believe is

sinful." Even as Montague exaggerates the northern abolitionism, Douglass' scathing condemnation of the United States reads more like fact than hyperbole. In any case, the distance between their positions is fertile ground for examination.

We talked about the beauty of Lincoln's First Inaugural Address. I mentioned the influences of the King James Bible and Shakespeare's Sonnet 144 (a look at the angels of our nature). The group talked about Lincoln's near-impossible task of preserving the union, and his willingness to do so with or without the institution of slavery.

The group discussed the prescience of Chapman Stuart's opposition to secession and the visceral passion of Sarah Morgan. One group member was particularly taken with her desire to use a carving knife on any soldier who gave her an insolent word. Others mentioned that some women made their way onto the battlefield and fought. It might be useful to ask readers to be on the lookout for another woman like Sarah Morgan in Ambrose Bierce's "What I Saw of Shiloh" (in the third set of readings).

In looking at Twain, we talked about the humanity of the militia he describes – their confused, bumbling, anti-heroism. Twain's penchant for holding a mirror up to humanity is clear. The obvious question is "how would we behave if we were part of a similar militia?" At least one participant said that Twain's account seemed realistic.

Finally, we spent some time discussing Elizabeth Pryor's questions: *What is patriotism? Who commands our first loyalty? Can loyalty be divided and still be true? And who defines the truth anyway?* From there we played "what if?" What if Virginia hadn't seceded? Based on our readings, what might have happened? What if Lee had chosen to stay in the US Army? What if Lee had chosen to sit out the war? One reader reminded the group that Lee could have sat out the war, that several well-respected military leaders had done just that. We talked about honor and ego and the sense of power one derives from being courted. The best analogue I could think of was of a football coach who must choose between the team he's coaching and the team that wants him. Of course, such a comparison takes something away from Lee – history gives us enough room to imagine that his motives were more than mercenary. William Faulkner said that the only stories worth writing were the ones that show the human heart in conflict with itself. With that in mind, I'm surprised there aren't more stories about Lee. What private ambivalences did he bring to the battlefield? What regret?

Given all the ground we covered, we did go over time, concluding our discussion around 8:30 pm. – Patrick Amelotte

Worland 6 attended on March 12, 2013
Basin 4 attended on March 13, 2013 (3-13-13, there won't be another day with those numbers for a millennium.)

Each group was half the attendance of the first discussion, and I heard that some of the essays were a hard slog. Many admired Frederick Douglass' skill as a writer and orator and marveled that he was self taught. When I asked how each of us would react to John Brown's attack on Harper's Ferry, we considered Henry David Thoreau, "A Plea for Captain John Brown" through his eyes and our own. Discussing Lincoln's First Inaugural led us to compare the situation just days after seven states had seceded with the movie "Lincoln," which took place two years into the war. Since there is no theater in Basin, I sent out an invitation as soon as it opened in Worland. Few of us realized what a clever politician Lincoln had been, and we speculated how long slavery might have lasted if the war had ended in a truce before the 13th amendment had passed. No one commented on the secessionist speeches; I think we were shocked that a whole section of the country could consider blacks innately inferior. Of course, Lincoln himself felt whites and blacks would never live side by side equally and urged colonization, and approved a disastrous resettlement of 300 volunteers to an island south of Haiti. Elizabeth Brown Pryor's excerpt from *Reading the Man: A Portrait of Robert E. Lee Through his Private Letters* changed some minds. We were surprised to learn that General Lee was not urged by his family to resign his commission in the United States Army, but that it was his personal decision and it went against some of his family's wishes. Many southern army and navy personnel stayed true to their oath to defend the United States and were ostracized by their families.

Mark Twain's story led us to wonder if it were autobiographical. I was able to relate that Sam Clemens was 25 when the war broke out, guiding a riverboat on the Mississippi River. He was single with no children. Although his family owned a slave, his older brother Orion was an ardent abolitionist. Missouri was divided and so was young Sam. Since he didn't want to be a sitting duck in the pilot house for the rifles of either side, he left and signed up with the Marion Rangers, who scattered after their first skirmish. Lincoln soon appointed Orion Clemens to the position of Secretary to the Territory of Nevada, so Sam signed on as his unpaid assistant; both departed for Carson City in July 1861. His depiction of slavery's effect upon a person named Jim in *Huckleberry Finn* cleverly satirized slavery when published in 1885. That same year he paid the college expenses for one of Yale's first black students, Warner T. McGuinn, who graduated at the top of his law school class and later became a mentor for Thurgood Marshall, the first African-American to serve on the United States Supreme Court. In the letter Twain wrote the letter to the dean of the Yale Law School explaining why he wanted to pay McGuinn's expenses, he wrote, "We have ground the manhood out of them & the shame is ours, not theirs." He then asked how much he should send.

My husband and I are watching a Teaching Company class by Gary Gallagher on the Civil War, so I am able to offer the bigger picture of the nation during the antebellum period and during the war, and to fill in details and answer questions.

I will send out email reminders and make a few phone calls to increase our attendance next week.

Claire Dunne

Ten people attended our second Civil War session in at Eastern Wyoming College in Torrington on 3/4. We began the session by listening to Morgan Freeman read a portion of Frederick Douglass's "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?". You can find the recording here - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=onXQRDYmPpM> Although I wouldn't particularly recommend the animated video, which imports non-19th century political issues into the speech, the audio itself is excellent and set the tone for our discussion.

We discussed at length the courage and grace of Frederick Douglass who, technically speaking, could have been returned to the South at nearly any time under certain interpretations of the Fugitive Slave Act, or at the very least have incited some real anger in his listeners in the way he so directly called out American hypocrisy with regards to slavery. As a group we were rather less enamored of Thoreau's "A Plea for Captain John Brown." For one thing, most participants didn't feel that Thoreau's rhetoric came close to the soaring power of Douglass's words, nor did we necessarily think that Thoreau was very accurate, historically or theologically, in directly comparing John Brown to Jesus Christ. Of course, no one at that antebellum period realized the bloodshed that was soon to be unleashed by the war, but Thoreau, a supposed pacifist and not a Christian in a traditional sense, seemed to be particularly approving of the violence which John Brown undertook, and which presaged to some degree what was to come in the war. We noted that President Lincoln's inaugural address specifically stated that Lincoln was more than willing to continue to allow slavery in the southern states, the same politician who would only a few short years later sign the Emancipation Proclamation. We speculated on how Lincoln was, first and foremost, a politician, as opposed to a man of principle. We shook our heads at Alexander Stephens' "Cornerstone" speech, with its wild assertions for the inferiority of the black race. We noted how, much like certain public figures today, Stephens claimed that both the Bible and science was on his side, and therefore his words – according to him – were incontrovertible. His speech made most of us uncomfortable, and we were glad to move on to discussion of other things. We noted how both speakers in the Virginia legislature took it for granted that slavery as an institution ought to be allowed to survive in the South, even among those who opposed outright secession from the North. We compared some of these statements to Thoreau's implication that the men of the South would be unwilling to die for a cause they knew to be wrong – it was clear to us that the leaders of the South not only believed they were in the right, but were perfectly willing to die for that cause (or at least send other men to die), which they were soon to prove when the war broke out. Finally, we considered the enigmatic figure of Robert E. Lee, some of us wondering what would have happened if Lee had used his considerable political influence in those days

immediately preceding the outbreak of war – could some of the conflict that followed have been avoided if Lee had spoken out more decisively? We considered how, in the end, Lee considered himself more a Virginian than an American, and we talked about the various cadets at West Point who had to make the decision as to which side they would support. We talked a little about some of the Civil War battlefields some of us had been to, how they differed greatly as to which side's heroism they emphasized, depending on whether the battlefield was located in the North or the South. Unfortunately, time did not permit us to address the last two readings, but we look forward to our next discussion of Section 3 of this series.

Court Merrigan

Session 2: Choosing Sides, 3/7/13 @ 7pm, Albany Co.

We had a nice turnout for the second meeting of "Making Sense of the American Civil War" at the Albany County Public Library (roughly 20). We once again arranged the chairs in a circle, and turned off the heat so that folks could hear more easily. This worked well, and we didn't get too cold!

Because so much of our first discussion had focused on slavery and racism, as well as its legacies in the south and elsewhere, I began by sharing a recent news item about the ongoing effects of the slave trade: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/britains-colonial-shame-slaveowners-given-huge-payouts-after-abolition-8508358.html>. This article describes previously unseen records that show "who received what in payouts from the government" after slavery was abolished by the British empire in 1833, amounts that would be worth millions today, traceable to individuals and families still in power. How much of their wealth and influence might be attributable to these payouts? How much of the ongoing struggles of those descended from slaves, who received nothing, might be attributable to the relative absence of intergenerational wealth?

We moved from there to discussion of the readings for the day. Choosing sides was not difficult: most agreed that Douglass was the most powerful and persuasive writer of the group. We wondered where the powerful, crowd-commanding orators of today might be found. Perhaps inside mega churches? Most were unimpressed by Lincoln's first inaugural address, though interested to note how well and intricately written it was compared to inaugural and state-of-the-union addresses today.

As a group we found it difficult to empathize with those writing/speaking on behalf of the confederacy, with one of our number suggesting that these folks must have been psychopaths. Several noted the ways in which these pro-secession speeches were constructed with misleading rhetoric. Some suggested that, by contrast, speeches like Douglass's weren't rhetorical, simply true. Others pointed to Douglass's highly crafted, skilled use of language as a part of what made his speech so powerful.

Our group appreciated being able to see the war from the

humorous and touching perspective Twain offered, and from the very different perspective of a young girl in the South. At the same time people wanted to hear more everyday, ordinary voices, like that of a common soldier.

In all, I would estimate that 70-80% of those in attendance offered at least one comment during discussion, and no one voice dominated. People found opportunities to share their own experiences, such as travel to the South or childhoods in southern states, which were relevant to the discussion.

Erin Forbes

Thirteen people gathered at the Powell Branch Library to discuss a collection of readings from the Civil War reading series. The group continued to enjoy the Civil War series because of the overwhelming depth it adds to our understanding of that war and that era. Specifically, we discussed "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" by Frederick Douglass, "A Plea for Captain John Brown" by Henry David Thoreau, Lincoln's First Inaugural Address, several speeches from the Virginia secession convention, and a short piece by Mark Twain. We discussed the strength of ability of all the writers in the collection. We compared the way they used language, vocabulary, and ideas to how modern writers and politicians use those things. The group discussed the idea that Douglass and Lincoln were great writers because they were self-taught to a large degree. This seems to create originality in their writing. We also remarked on the varied voices of the era—obviously every person from every walk of life had an investment in the beginning of the Civil War, but we enjoyed discussing how each person that we read had a very unique investment. Each person had a different viewpoint for why the states should stay together or why the states should divide, and it was interesting to look back at the moments before the war to try to figure out why people wanted war or did not want war. We also discussed the notion that so much of the discussion was about subjective perspective, and not so much about accurate truth.

Making Sense of Shiloh America's War: Talking About the Civil War and Emancipation on their 150th Anniversaries – Part Three Anthology edited by Edward L. Ayers

Ten readers gathered for discussion three, focusing on the battle at Shiloh. It was a treat to have Jason (from the Humanities Council) join us. I began by reminding us all about how hard it is with our 20/20 hindsight to really know how we would have felt about the issue of slavery in 1861. While we see the issue clearly today, in the Civil War years many people were morally ambiguous on slavery. Northerners likely opposed slavery, but enough to go to

war over it? Many southerners felt victimized by the north and saw their situation clearly: leave the union or our way of life will be doomed. But Lincoln initially was willing to allow slavery to continue where it existed - anything, nearly, to preserve the union. We discussed how this lack of moral clarity resonates in today's politics. We moved on to discuss the readings relating to Shiloh. I circulated the May, 2012, issue of National Geographic, with its cover story, "Eyewitness to the Civil War." Part I describes the role on the scene artists played in documenting battles.

They were, of course, in danger much as imbedded journalists have been in recent wars. There's a great drawing from the battle of Shiloh. The article is worth reading both to learn how long it took for newspapers/magazines to publish these sketches and how the artists often "amended" what they recorded, making the scene and action both better and worse. As we moved the discussion to our reading for session three, it was interesting to contrast Bierce and Grant, both on their style of writing and on their "take" of the battles.

When we added General Bragg's address to his soldiers into the mix, we had a vigorous discussion about (to use a modern political term) the "spin" these leaders put on the battle of Shiloh. Who won, even if they lost? Bragg argued that the south did. And he used that spirit to urge the troops on the later battles. No wonder the south stayed in! Grant, in his memoirs, aims to set the record straight (he was seen to have failed at Shiloh). The group moved on to talk about the terrain and the impact nature had on the fighting (who knew that so many soldiers burned to death, due to fires started by weaponry), the chaos on the ground with soldiers being ill prepared and often ill equipped, and the enormous carnage caused by the weapons of war. These excerpts provide far more than any textbook can of what it must have felt like at Shiloh. This is especially true with the excerpt from Shelby Foote's novel. The young boy we meet is there because a general told him it was his duty. He has no clue as to his role, what he is to do and how. He only knows that he has to hold on to his rifle..... and once he has seen all the confusion, carnage, and has been wounded..... keep going. We truly see war from the soldier's point of view. He can't hear the officers, he feels alone and unsure, he doubts he's doing the right thing.

We wonder how different war is today. To talked last about Bobbie Ann Mason's short story, Shiloh. One reader said she didn't like it and didn't know why it was included. Others joined her. I had looked up the story and Mason's rationale for using Shiloh and we talked about that. When Leroy and Norma Jean travel to Shiloh for a picnic (and to save their marriage), Leroy expects a golf course. Instead, he finds a park with noisy children, picnickers, cars, and crowds. The Shiloh battleground isn't what he expected, just like his marriage and relationship to Norman Jean isn't what he expected. They struggle to go on as the Union and Confederate soldiers struggled to go on. As Leroy reads of the thousands of men who died at Shiloh, he can't comprehend it. He can only think of the battleground in relation to his life and the lives of his family. How do we think about our historical landmarks, our sacred sites?

One last word about Jason Burge's visit. The group so enjoyed meeting him and were flattered that he would

make an effort to visit. He was so helpful in discussing racism in the deep south today and especially helpful with the Shiloh story. Please send him our way again!

Barbara Gose

And one final thought..... With her permission, here is an email from Judy Johnson about last night's discussion.

Thought that was a good discussion last night, enjoyed our visitor's viewpoints on racism and how prevalent it still is today. In general as citizens of a free nation we say we abhor it but I think many of us are still fighting the demons of our youth that suggested, if not outright proclaimed, someone else is "less" because they are different for whatever reason: race, religion, politics, orientation.....We fight the same battles year after year and while in some instances there is forward movement the undercurrent is always there. People don't seem to learn from history and are doomed to repeat it. That is a frightening notion for me.

Six of us gathered on a clear, crisp Friday afternoon at the Baggs Library to discuss the role the Battle of Shiloh played in the Civil War, and its effects on both sides. Our readings were from Part III of America's War, "Making Sense of Shiloh." We began by talking about what was happening in the Civil War in early 1862, and how the battle of Shiloh in April 1862 changed the momentum of the war. Shiloh was named after the church in the field, where the desperate South tried to drive Union forces out of the Mississippi Valley. Ulysses S. Grant's Union Forces were in an uncomfortable position, on the Confederate side of the Tennessee River, as he waited for General Buell's 30 000 men to join him. Southern General Albert Johnston took the opportunity to try to drive Grant's army into the river, and fighting was intense. The Union Army withstood the attack and fought back; the battleground was a butchery, Johnston was killed fighting, Grant stood his ground, and the Confederates failed to drive the Union out. At that point, both armies must have realized it was going to be a long bloody war.

Ambrose Bierce's account of the battle, which he fought in as a young man, written twenty years after the battle, is clear and well-written. The men's confusion comes through clearly, as well as the brutality of the battle. The next reading, taken from Ulysses S. Grant's memoirs, written in 1885 when Grant was dying of cancer, gives a balanced description of the battle and impressed me by its fairness and consideration for all who took part in it. It also clearly describes the layout and process of the battle, giving the reader a more objective understanding of Shiloh's strategy and logistics. However, the next reading, taken from historian Shelby Foote's Shiloh: A Novel was probably the favorite of most of us, and generated lively discussion. Foote's novel presents both Northern and Southern points of views of the battle; our reading was from the South, and presented a green young soldier's initiation into fighting and view of his hero General Johnston's death.

Our final reading, Bobbie Ann Mason's celebrated story "Shiloh" generated controversy. Some readers couldn't understand why a story of a failing marriage set in modern times was included. We discussed the husband's injuries, the changes in the marriage's development and the problems culminating in a visit to the battleground and the wife's decision to go her own way. We talked about the symbolism of Shiloh and why the visit was the climax of the story. Though it was the reading least clearly related to the Civil War, it was one of the funnest to discuss and made a nice change from the battle accounts.

This month we will read and discuss James McPherson's Antietam, before returning to the anthology in December to close with Part 5, "War and Freedom." I think we are all enjoying it; it is a valuable series of readings.

Mary Kay Solomon

When we met for our third meeting, we had 8 participants in attendance: 7 men, 1 woman.

I opened the evening with the "Shiloh" clip from Ken Burns' *The Civil War*. When it was over, I asked for a reaction. One group member said that the battle certainly was a marker, a defining moment. I wondered if both sides of the battle, victor and loser, might have similar feelings of despondency after the battle. What is it that makes each side stay engaged, even after such bloody carnage? One participant, a Vietnam vet, responded, "There's no turning back. The box has been opened. You can't go back."

There was a brief pause, and then another member of the group brought up the Herman Melville poem "Shiloh," which was in the packet I had handed out on the first night.

Shiloh

A Requiem.

Skimming lightly, wheeling still,
The swallows fly low
Over the field in clouded days,
The forest-field of Shiloh--
Over the field where April rain
Solaced the parched ones stretched in pain
Through the pause of night
That followed the Sunday fight
Around the church of Shiloh--
The church so lone, the log-built one,

That echoed to many a parting groan

And natural prayer

Of dying foemen mingled there--

Foemen at morn, but friends at eve--

Fame or country least their care:

(What like a bullet can undeceive!)

But now they lie low,

While over them the swallows skim,

And all is hushed at Shiloh.

The reader pointed to the line, "What like a bullet can undeceive!" He said that he thought that line spoke well to Shiloh's effect on both sides. The group talked for a while about innocence and experience.

From there we moved into a discussion of Ambrose Bierce. I read the opening line and mentioned his attempt to establish a consensus with his audience. In war literature, the soldier/writer tends to struggle with reaching his non-soldier audience, because the audience doesn't have the experience to recognize the truth of what the writer is saying. Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story" addresses that problem well, as does William Broyles Jr.'s "Why Men Love War."

Next, I read the last two paragraphs of "What I Saw of Shiloh" aloud. One participant was particularly struck by the ending line: *Give me but one touch of thine artist hand upon the dull canvas of the Present; gild for but one moment the drear and somber scenes of to-day, and I will willingly surrender another life than the one that I should have thrown away at Shiloh.* "I never expected that," he said.

Some discussion ensued; we went back to the bullet that undecives, and we talked about Bierce's tone and his ability to locate the reader in the head of the individual foot soldier. We went on to talk about the quality of his writing. One reader was intrigued by Bierce's apparent distance from the piece. How could one who lived it achieve such distance?

In "Why Men Love War," Broyles mentions the veteran's distance when he quotes Michael Heir's story from *Dispatches*: "Patrol went up the mountain. One man came back. He died before he could tell us what happened." Broyles comments on the story thus: "It is a great story, a combat haiku, all negative space and darkness humming with portent. It seems rich, unique to Vietnam. But listen, now, to this:

'We all went up to Gettysburg, the summer of '63; and some of us came back from there: and that's all except the details.

"That is the account of Gettysburg by one Praxiteles Swan, onetime captain of the Confederate States Army. The language is different, but it is the same story. And it is a story that I would imagine has been told for as long as men have gone to war."

But Bierce, clearly, is working to overcome the combat vet's tendency to exclude his non-warrior audience, working to reveal the details. We decided that perhaps his apparent distance is a result of his experience, or perhaps it's the only way he can approach that experience.

One reader brought up Bierce's sense of the politics of the battle. I asked, "how do troops know what's going on?" We talked about knowing and not-knowing. I told the group that when I was in the Marine Corps' School of Infantry, I was taught that the word "infantry" comes from the root *infans*, which means "one who does not speak," but as an infantryman, I often thought the word should come from a root that means "one who does not know."

From here we connected the appearance of the woman on the boat with Sarah Morgan. I asked, "If Shiloh were fought today, how would women participate? Do you think it's odd that our sense of equality includes participation in combat?" Some group members said they thought more women would fight today, but that the battlefield would be different, too. Not everyone shared the idea that women and men should have the same roles in combat.

The group noticed that like Bierce, Grant's accounts were written in a cool, matter-of-fact tone. They remarked that he seemed particularly detached when describing the men under the bluff. One reader mentioned that according to his reading, Grant may have actually been as detached as he seems -- some historians, he said, wonder if Grant ever fired a shot during the war. I wondered if the enemy ever had a sense of this detachment. From their perspective, his coolness may have made him seem implacable, a demoralizing trait in an adversary.

We talked about how Grant was changed by Shiloh, because he realized that the war would be one of attrition. I asked about his foraging policy. Did he really believe his troops would furnish homeowners with receipts? The group was noncommittal, but they did agree with the need for the policy. I augmented that sentiment with Sun Tzu, who also argues in favor of foraging in *The Art of War*. One reader reminded the group that much of the war was fought in the South: the North was largely spared the pain of foraging invaders.

Another participant said that some historians have called into question the many stories of Grant's drinking. He suggested that there may have been political motivations for such stories.

Whatever he was, Grant was complex. A group member mentioned that Grant had married into a slave owning family and had several slaves of his own. An interesting comparison -- one I should have drawn -- would be to look

at Grant and Lee side by side. That said, such a comparison might not be just unless one had plenty of time to do so.

The Braxton Bragg piece was "classic spin" according to one reader. Another said there's no way of telling how Bragg truly estimated Grant, nor whether (or how) Bragg himself was changed by his experience of the battle. I wondered aloud how much of Bragg's speech the troops actually heard. We connected this idea to Shelby Foote's piece -- Beauregard speaking, but no one hearing him.

Some said they enjoyed Shelby Foote, but one reader said it "just didn't feel right." He said it wasn't a matter of being genuine, but that his piece just didn't carry that foreign quality that writing of the time carries. He said that this comment applied to *March* as well (that it just didn't feel right). I asked if he thought the authors were just being audience aware, but he said that it was more than that. His sense, he said, was that Foote just couldn't quite compare with Bierce. Another participant said that he appreciated this insight.

One reader brought up the latest Ken Burns film, *Death and the Civil War*. You can watch the first chapter online here:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/death/player/>

At Shiloh, the confederates were buried in mass graves with vague markers: "125 dead rebels." We talked a bit about the thousands of families whose soldiers were buried in such graves. But thousands more weren't buried at all. While the North developed a kind of graves registration, there was nothing of the sort in the South. One reader said that 1 in 5 confederate soldiers died in the war, and that many of them simply vanished into the conflict, leaving no trace.

Most of the group seemed flummoxed by Bobby Ann Mason's short story. One reader asked, "Why was this even in this collection of readings?" Nevertheless, we looked at the couple's history, their tendency to build (but at cross purposes), the their grief-haunted relationship. One group member said that Shiloh certainly seemed like an odd starting point, but when we talked about it more, we decided that it was both starting point and ending point. It seems, as one person had said at the outset of our evening, that Shiloh was a defining moment in these characters' lives -- a place of division, confusion, distance.

The Ken Burns clip on Shiloh ends with the line, "Shiloh is a Hebrew word, meaning 'place of peace.'" As I write this, I recall descriptions of that first night at Shiloh: Grant sitting beneath a tree to avoid the screams of the wounded; in the flashes of lightning, glimpses of hogs feeding on the dead.

We adjourned around 8:00 pm. -- Patrick Amelotte

There were 10 attendants for the third session of the Civil War Series at the Wyoming State Museum in Cheyenne.

Having such a small number allowed me to change my position in the group, and I was able to sit with them as we discussed the readings. It was a nice change of pace.

This discussion was much less structured than previous discussions. We spent the beginning portion to discuss the fiction we read for this session. Though the group admitted that they had no problems with fiction, they did not particularly care for Foote or Mason. They did, however, understand the purpose of Foote's selection more than Mason's selection. To them, Mason seemed to have little to do with what we are discussing as a whole. The only connection they seemed to make was the fact that the couple visited Shiloh, which represented the uncertainty and instability of all things.

Our discussions of Foote lead us into an examination of the major historical figures that played a part in this battle (Bier, Grant, Johnston, and Beauregard). How did Johnston's death affect the way people perceived the war? What kept soldiers united and fighting? The group seemed to agree that passion for the "cause" grew after this battle. Southerners quickly realized that they were fighting for their freedoms in their own backyards. Northerners realized they could continue to fight and gain territory, which would hopefully lead to victory. At this point, many participants began to realize that the war wasn't going to be over quickly, and someone had to win.

We then discussed the reliability of Bierce's and Grant's accounts of what happened. In fact, Bierce states in his own writing, "And this was, O so long ago! How they come back to me—magic spell—those years of youth when I was soldiering!" (135). Given the fact that Bierce and Grant wrote their accounts after the fact, we discussed their accountability. Most agreed that we are to take everything with a grain of salt, but we have no reason to not trust these authors.

The remainder of our discussion had little to do with the readings. We began discussing what we wished would be in the collection, as well as what we believe to be missing. Where is Lincoln's voice at this point? What did he have to say about the events that were unfolding? Why did so many people disappear during this battle? Were they afraid of the rest of the war? Where did they flee? The West? People in the group began to make predictions about the remainder of the war. We obviously know who won, but what about the battles (like the Battle of Shiloh) that remained between Shiloh and the end of the war? It was interesting hearing other people's ideas about what would lead up to the war's end.

I found this to be the most stimulating discussion so far. I credit this to the fact that the group was so small, and people were more willing to discuss issues when fewer faces were staring back at them. I look forward to our next discussion.

Shannon McKinzie

Worland 11 attended April 2
Basin 7 attended April 3

A lively group in Worland keep the discussion humming, especially after someone asked, "Why are men so willing to go to war?" An elderly fellow replied, "Because we have no brains until we are 30," at which a second man rejoined "You are being too generous." We talked about warfare appearing at the same time as the human race (7000 year old burials inc which all the skulls had been bashed in), and the differences between men and women in their view of war (we have one female soldier in our ranks). This conversation continued for quite a while, including experiences in WWII (yes, we have some old members) and Iraq and Afghanistan (and we have a few younger members).

As for the battle itself, we talked about the horror of the casualties and how the news affected the people at home. In the military discussion, we noted Albert Sidney Johnston was the highest ranked officer to die in the war, dead at Shiloh, and whether P.G.T. Beauregard was able to replace him or whether the rebs lost their advantage when they lost Johnston.

In Basin, one Vietnam vet spoke at length, and I decided to let him say what he wanted to say, since he has been formulating his feelings about war for decades. The other attendees were women, and the youngest opined that she would never understand men's willingness to volunteer. Another woman replied that we count on the men to defend us though.

Despite my feeble attempt, I couldn't convince anyone that Bobbie Ann Mason's modern story, "Shiloh" wasn't a waste of space in the anthology. It was deemed frivolous compared to the weighty readings.

Submitted with great admiration to those who held the country together 150 years ago, Claire Dunne

Seven participants gathered at Eastern Wyoming College for our third Civil War session, "Making Sense of Shiloh." We began by taking a look at the map of the battlefield, which is a confused mass of arrows, retreats and charges, and last stands. This gave us some sense of just how confused a battlefield Shiloh was, and how little sense the average participant – or indeed, even the generals – had of what was taking place overall. This sense, of course, was confirmed by the readings, which – with the possible exception of Bobbie Ann Mason's short story – all contributed to our modern-day understanding that there was little contemporary understanding of what was happening. Though several of the participants, including myself, have been to various Civil War battlefield historical sites, none of us had been to Shiloh. To augment our understanding, we watched a video from the Civil War trust, which really gave us a good visual understanding of the battle. This video is available here - <http://www.civilwar.org/battlefields/shiloh/maps/battle-of-shiloh-animated.html> This animated map is highly recommended, and we will be returning to this site for our discussion of Antietam, I think.

In any case, while the animated map was helpful, its very concise summary does tend to give one the impression that the generals, at least, had a view to the overall outline of the battle, which was not borne out by the readings. As a group we particularly enjoyed Ambrose Bierce's "What I Saw of Shiloh," and several participants said they were going to seek out Shelby Foote's novel *Shiloh* to read the rest of it. We discussed at some length the excerpt from Ulysses Grant's *Personal Memoirs*, and were struck by how dry the tone was. Of course, Grant was writing with an eye toward history and perhaps to exonerate himself from blame for the horrors of that day. Truth is, though, there was plenty of blame to go around. The whole operation, on both sides, seemed to awry almost from the beginning. We found poignant General Braxton Bragg's "Speech to the Army of the Mississippi" in light of the terrible defeat the Confederates had suffered, and took note of how, once again, the Confederates insisted that men fighting for their homelands could not be defeated, a sentiment echoing that of the Virginia Legislature as it considered secession just a few months previously. We wondered how the contemporary American public would react to news of such massive casualties on the battlefield, and we lamented the fate of the luckless soldiers still forced to use 18th-century military tactics in what was effectively the first industrialized war. How did they do it, we wondered, marching back and forth in straight lines across fields so thick with bodies you couldn't even see the ground, leaving behind the wounded? The thought of those poor wounded soldiers who burned to death after being unable to escape the forest fires caused by the battle also weighed on us. And we wondered, too, what happened to the civilians in the area. Did they flee in time, or were they, too, casualties of war? What about the owner of the Peach Orchard or the Bloody Pond? What would it be like trying to come back to an area like that after such a momentous, bloody battle? As usual, the group raised a lot more questions than we were able to answer, or that even can be answered at all.

With that in mind, we will slog forward to our next meeting about an even more bloody battle, Antietam.

Court Merrigan

Session 3: Making Sense of Shiloh, 3/28/13 @ 7pm, Albany County

I felt, and comments from participants on the way out seemed to confirm, that this third session was the best and most engaging so far, though attendance was down to about 16. The smaller circle we were able to form may have contributed, but I also felt that folks were just plain interested in thinking about Shiloh!

I began by asking which of the readings from last time, if any, stood out in people's minds, or felt particularly relevant to the readings about Shiloh. Several people noted the strong similarities between Twain's piece and Ambrose Bierce's "What I Saw." We wondered about the role and place of humor—which we see in both Twain and Bierce—in representing such horrific events.

This lead fairly naturally to some discussion of the

questions Ayers raised in the prefatory material for this session, about the responsibility that fiction writers may or may not have toward history. I was particularly curious to hear reactions to Bobbie Ann Mason's short story "Shiloh." Many were confused as to why this story about a twentieth-century couple was included. But several other participants rose to this challenge by beautifully tracing connections between the events represented in the story and the history of the Civil War in general and Shiloh more especially. For example, one woman noted the similarities between Norman Jean's experience and the experiences of women whose husbands returned from war with disabilities. The general sense of confusion that pervades the story parallels the general confusion that characterizes Shiloh more largely.

Several members of our group had been to battle sites, and shared their experiences, and one couple had just visited Shiloh the previous week! Their perspective on what it is like to visit a place where so many died so horrifically was powerful.

The previous session folks had expressed some discontent at the underrepresentation of "ordinary" voices from the war, so Kathy Marquis brought, and read two letters from, a terrific new collection of Civil War letters: <http://www.mnhs.org/library/Christie/intropage.html>. These letters, from a young man who fought at Shiloh back to his father in Minnesota, really helped us get a good perspective on the discrepancies between the war as seen from the ground and the war as elites, politicians, and traditional histories tell it. For example, this young man asks his father to tell him what is happening with the war beyond his little corner of the world. It is clear that he, a common soldier, has no other way of accessing the "big picture."

Many of us had a hard time visualizing the battle in terms of geography and tactics, and noted the overriding sense of chaos, disarray, and panic that comes across in Bierce's, Foote's, and even Grant's descriptions of Shiloh. While we are aware that maps and other tools can give us after the fact a "bird's eye view" of the battle, most of us agreed that what "really" happened cannot be understood from that top-down perspective. To have any sense of what happened at Shiloh is to be confused, unsure, even anxious, like those who were on the ground.

The conversation definitely had a life of its own, with all but one member of the group (who seemed engaged, just quiet) actively participating throughout. There were several moments where I asked for and offered particular interpretations about passages I found particularly powerful in Bierce and Mason, such as Bierce's fantastic attribution of agency to his company's own guns: "O those cursed guns! - not the enemys, but our own. Had it not been for them, we might have died like men." Other topics that came up include: the fact that literary realism grows out of the Civil War, as well as the impact of photography on the home front, the ways that care and concern for the corpses of fallen soldiers changed over the course of the war (something we will touch on more next session when we read Drew Gilpin Faust), and the question of the likelihood of British support for the confederacy (something that we also hope to talk about next session).

Erin Forbes

Thirteen people gathered at the Powell Branch Library to discuss a collection of readings from the Civil War reading series. The collection of readings focused on the Battle of Shiloh. The readings that we discussed this week were "What I Saw at Shiloh" by Ambrose Bierce, "Memoirs" by Ulysses Grant, "Shiloh" by Shelby Foote, among a few others. We all agreed that the short excerpts from the book need a greater context to discuss them in good ways—it's difficult to read short glimpses of the war. It's also difficult to jump from piece to piece in discussion. To ground the discussion in a more practical way, we looked at the Battle of Shiloh as a whole. To do so, we happen to have a Civil War historian and Park Ranger who attends our book discussions—he gives presentations on specific battles at Northwest College, so the group asked him to present on the Battle of Shiloh. He gave a short presentation on the battle which gave us each a better understanding of the battle and gave some depth to the readings. In reaction to the readings and lecture, the group agreed that we know so little about the Civil War, and that this discussion series has a steep and fascinating learning curve. Our biggest dilemma was to decide if we want to look at each battle from a global level where we consider things like dates, places, troop movements, number of troops, number of casualties, and so on. Or do we want to search and compare how individuals suffered through injuries, death, emotion, loss, pride, victory, depression, separation, loneliness, and every other reaction to war there might be. We agreed that it was best to consider it all.

The Shape of War Crossroads of Freedom : Antietam – Part Four

by James McPherson

Fourteen readers gathered to discuss Antietam. I began by asking what they wanted to begin with. We were off.... First topic, why didn't Lincoln fire General McClellan earlier. This led to a vigorous discussion of his personality/qualities versus those of General Lee. And then we were on to the comparison of officers north and south. We moved on to the reactions by various entities (abolitionists, other northerners, Democrats, France and Britain, southerners, slaves) to the Emancipation Proclamation. It was particularly interesting to talk about why Britain might support the Confederacy. The impact of the Antietam win and the Emancipation Proclamation on the election of 1862 was examined. This led us to talk about the vitriol in elections in general! And of course several people brought up the fact that a different election result could have led to termination of the war. We went on to talk about the general concept of pivotal events, such as Antietam. In the case of the Civil War, was Antietam really such a turning point? After all, the war

continued for two more years. Technology and the war was an interesting topic, conducted mostly by the men in attendance, I might add. We discussed inventions during the Civil War era and compared that war's weaponry to World War I. Finally, I brought up the subject of the carnage, injury, and death that resulted from the battle of Antietam. Several of us had seen the PBS American Experience on Death and the Civil War so we talked about the changes the war brought. This documentary is based on This Republic of Suffering, excerpted in our America's War reader. The author argues that the nation's view of death was forever changed by the Civil War. For the first time the government, by the end of the war, played a pivotal role in caring for, burying, and notifying families of the dead. Ambulance service, identification of the dead, embalming, notification, cemeteries, and Decoration (Memorial) Day all resulted from the War. As we were ending someone brought up Matthew Brady and the role of photography in bringing the war home to civilians (for example, the exhibit, The Dead of Antietam in New York City). We compared this to our rather sanitized information on recent wars in that caskets are seldom filmed for nightly news reports. And we remembered that southerners in the Civil War likely lived more closely to death and destruction as the war was fought mainly on their land. One of the benefits of multiple sessions on one topic is that in the case of the Civil War I think we have come to understand the extent of the death and destruction and appreciate the toll this took on all people who lived during this period, north and south. It's a powerful series.

Barbara Gose

On November 16th, 6 of us gathered at the Baggs Library to discuss James M. McPherson's *Crossroads of Freedom: Antietam, The Battle that Changed the Course of the Civil War*. It was a lively discussion, from the very beginning. I hardly had a chance to discuss the background to Antietam, before people were breaking in with comments and opinions about the generals. We discussed the harassing guerrilla warfare of Jeb Stuart, Nathan Bedford Forrest, and others, as well as the difficulties Lincoln was having finding a general to command the northern forces who would fight.

We spent a good part of the discussion on George B. McClellan's behavior and nature. Everyone agreed that McClellan's opinion of Robert E. Lee -- "Cautious and weak under grave responsibility...wanting in moral firmness when pressed by heavy responsibility... likely to be timid and irresolute in action.." was not only wrong, but enlighteningly wrong, because it described his own nature so well. The failure of General Halleck's command, and McClellan's response, waiting for the nation to turn to him to save it were well discussed. We also spent time on Lincoln's reasons for turning to him to reorganize and re-energize the northern forces. He did an excellent job of getting them ready to fight again, even though he didn't use them much, and Lincoln recognized this, and was willing to go against his advisors' counsel and appoint McClellan for that purpose, despite his many drawbacks.

We also discussed the role of England, hesitating to recognize the south. Also, Lincoln's growing frustration as he sought an occasion to issue the Emancipation Proclamation: for that, he needed a victory. Antietam, the single bloodiest day of any war America has fought, gave him that opportunity.

Linda Fleming, our organizing angel, had brought in an interview with Richard Slotkin, scholar who published *The Long Road to Antietam*, which discussed many of the issues we were covering, in particularly the perception of the Battle of Antietam, McClellan's role, and McClellan's relationship with Lincoln. An interesting and pertinent interview, it provided us a touchstone for much of the discussion. We are thoroughly enjoying the Civil War series.

Mary Kay Solomon

May 21 Worland 12 attended
May 22 Basin 10 attended

This session appealed most to the men in the group since it talked about the details of battle, though everyone appreciated the complex causes and effects of this pivotal battle described in James M. McPherson, *Crossroad of Freedom: Antietam*. A few had visited Antietam and described the feelings engendered there: one said holy, another eerie. One commented that the re-enactors tried hard to duplicate the uniforms and gear, but they couldn't that they were well fed!

Throughout our discussions the condition of black people at the time and since often arose. Both groups felt it may have been decades before we finally shook off the stain of slavery in our nation. This situation of modern blacks was discussed and we wondered why there isn't more parity among the races by now. We all know it is still at the heart of our society, from lunch counter sit-ins in the Fifties to furor around the shooting of Treyvon Martin today.

Claire Dunne

Seven participants met at Eastern Wyoming College on 4/1 to discuss *Antietam: The Battle That Changed the Course of the Civil War*. We started the discussion by viewing another great animated video from the Civil War Trust on the battle. The link is here - <http://www.civilwar.org/battlefields/antietam/maps/antietam-animated-map.html>

Though overall we found this battle less confusing, tactically speaking, than Shiloh, it was at times hard to follow the progress of the battle. The maps in the book, we felt, would have been had they been in color; all the arrows and pointers did not always render the battle with as much clarity as we would have liked. We thought it was interesting, too, how much time was devoted to aspects outside the battle itself, such as the political situation leading up to the battle itself, or the political intrigue in Europe as both the Union and the Confederacy vied for support from England and France. One member of our

group is English, and she thought that, at the time, the representatives of Her Majesty's government in London would have been inclined to favor the Southerners, because, in her words, the Northerners likely came off as "uncouth," in comparison to the gentlemanly Southerners. We remarked on how the course of American history could have been different if Queen Victoria had not been on an extended tour of the European continent, and so been in London during the dark days leading up to the battle for the Union, and approved British support of the Confederacy. Even if no direct British military support had been provided, just the diplomatic recognition of the South as its own nature would have been a devastating blow to the Union. One of Lincoln's primary political objectives, after all, was to never recognize the Confederacy as a nation, but rather as rebels from the greater Union.

In any case, we also remarked on the amazing discovery of General Lee's Special Orders No. 191, wrapped up with three cigars, which revealed the thrust of Lee's battle plan in Maryland. General McClellan got terribly lucky on that one. Several members of the group were almost outraged by McClellan's doddering approach to the battle, wanting to know why he didn't pursue Lee's troops after the battle, or move actively during it. Think how many lives might have been saved if McClellan had acted more decisively. We also pondered the sheer scale of the carnage. Today a single casualty in Afghanistan warrants headlines; on that single day there more than 17,000 casualties. We were doubtful that today's American public would be able to stomach such massive loss of life, which, upon further consideration, most of us decided was a good thing. The video mentioned above also discussed how a Confederate officer mistakenly shouted "About face!" to his regiment, causing a general retreat from the Sunken Road, which the Confederates might well have been able to hold – another turning point based on the flimsiest of chance.

We also wondered where General Grant was during all this. How would events have gone differently if he had been in command? We also considered the patriotism displayed by the populace of Maryland, who did not welcome the advancing Confederate troops with open arms at all, but did roundly cheer on advancing Union columns. We speculated that this was owing to the local culture of that area of Maryland, dominated by yeoman farmers who would have had little experience with slavery and little respect for the institution if they had. We also remarked on how General Lee's advance into the Union was opposed to his own doctrine of defending the homeland of the South. As far as we understood, Lee believed he could win the war as long as the North was seen as the aggressor; but here was General Lee himself, being the aggressor into the North. It was a bold move, but we wondered if it was a wise one. Finally, we also spent a good deal of time talking about the raw bravery exhibited by the troops on both sides. To march through a field of tall corn in closely massed ranks into the face of gunfire and cannon required a level of courage that we are only able to guess at. How did they sustain themselves, those soldiers, what did they tell themselves to keep on going? Such a waste, such a waste, several members remarked. Indeed. I think we will aim to discuss whether the great

carnage of Antietam and battles like it ultimately achieved in our final session.

Court Merrigan

Session 4: The Shape of War 4/18/13 @ 7pm, Albany

We had another enjoyable and thought-provoking discussion about the Civil War last night in Laramie, with once again about 16 participants. One or two voices perhaps predominated, but the vast majority of the participants also made substantial contributions to the discussion, and most folks seemed interested to hear what everyone had to say throughout the evening.

We had hoped to watch a clip from "Death and the Civil War," a PBS documentary based on Drew Gilpin Faust's *This Republic of Suffering*, but technology got the better of us, and we decided to save it for next time.

We began by talking about similarities and differences between the representation of Shiloh and the picture we got of Antietam, especially from McPherson. I suggested that, whereas the idea of the Civil War that came across from the Shiloh readings was a devastating, bloody chaos, the unit on Antietam, which was actually the more deadly battle—the deadliest single day in U.S. history—painted a much clearer picture. This was a theme that permeated much of our discussion throughout the evening: what kinds of choices did McPherson make in order to tell the kind of story he wanted to tell, about Antietam as a decisive turning point in a war that lasted another two and a half deadly years? How are historians, even when "objective," also storytellers? At the beginning and end of the evening, for instance, we debated the characterization of McClellon that we saw in McPherson's book. Was there room to be more sympathetic to McClellon's hesitation to slaughter those whom he would embrace as countrymen, or to put his own troops in harm's way without basic provisions, like shoes and food?

The group was also very interested in thinking more about the Civil War in relation to international history, especially the question of possible British and French involvement, and the complex contours of racism in relation to anti-slavery movements and colonialism across the globe.

We were also very interested in the new perspective on the "Emancipation Proclamation" that the readings for unit 4 offered. Many of us of course think of Abraham Lincoln as the president who freed the slaves, because that was the right thing to do. McPherson's book really does a nice job of laying out the political and strategic aspects of Lincoln's eventual decision to issue the "Emancipation Proclamation." McPherson also shows us the many ways that proclamation wound up being interpreted. We were especially appalled at the description in the *London Times* that suggested that Lincoln was a conniving evil mastermind looking to unleash a horde of fiendish devils on the innocents of the South. Yet we recognize that those who were inclined toward that interpretation could cite the fact that Lincoln only emancipated those slaves in rebel states. If he really cared about ending slavery as an

ethical reform, rather than a desperate wartime maneuver, why not end it everywhere?

We are looking forward to the readings for the final session, with their more direct focus on African Americans in relation to the Civil War.

Erin Forbes

Twelve people gathered at the Powell Branch Library to discuss "Crossroad of Freedom: Antietam" by James M. McPherson. This was the fourth installment of the Civil War Series in Powell. The group was very impressed with the book on many levels. We did start with some criticism. The first few chapters of the book set-up the context of the battle of Antietam, and there were necessary details, but those details were a little tedious. It's a funny, but honest criticism because we all agreed all of the details were nicely presented and certainly needed. We agreed that it was needed to know and understand the context of the battle, especially because we don't know the complete context of the Civil War, but it did take some time to get through. Overall this book was quite excellent. We greatly admired the introduction to the book, which was short and to-the-point, just two finely written pages. The introduction had some great lines about the overall perspective of the Civil War, namely that its purpose changed while the Civil War was fought. That is to say, there were many reasons the Civil War took place, and those reasons changed and some reasons were added. We also discussed the length of the book. The length was short, under 200pages. We all found this to be a perfect length, as it enhanced McPherson's storytelling. He didn't labor to get his point across. He explained events, he offered some opinions, he moved on. We agreed that too many stories and non-fiction books are over-written. This book was not. We enjoyed it. McPherson tells a complete, readable, compelling story of how the battle of Antietam was the turning point in the war, how the battle was fought, and what the battle meant to the soldiers and the country.

**War and Freedom
America's War: Talking About the Civil
War and Emancipation on their 150th
Anniversaries – Part Five
Anthology edited by Edward L. Ayers**

Eleven readers gathered for this final discussion. We all agreed that these speeches, excerpts, essays were the best reading from America's War. It was interesting to compare Frederick Douglass' passionate appeal to blacks to fight for the Union to his scathing attack on "white" America in the decade earlier. We traced Lincoln's evolution and sometime maneuvering on the slavery question as well as the first and second Inaugural address. Evidently the second Inaugural was met with displeasure or at least disappointment by a largely pro

Union crowd. And yet today we revere it and hold its last paragraph up as a model of civility and compassion. History has treated Mr. Lincoln very kindly and with good reason. But it does make us think about how our current leaders will be seen in the future. I talked maybe more than I usually do as I brought the history of Reconstruction and then civil rights up to the present. We concluded with talking about secession (Texas always wants to secede when it's unhappy) and the voter identification effort as more recent examples of political unrest primarily related to minorities and politics.

We loved this series. Every one of us felt that we learned a lot. One of the men and I have taught U.S. history, but we agreed, along with the other readers, that textbooks and general studies do not portray the struggles of individual lives. After our reading for this series we have a better understanding of both the institution of slavery and the particular impact of the system - four million people freed, no jobs, no land, no education, little legal protection. An America, both south and north, unwilling to do much to help them, not really wanting them. Four million people not really knowing what to do with their freedom. A south totally decimated, a north booming with industrialization and westward expansion. Radicals in control of Congress dominating a weak president, even to the extent of impeaching him. And we think that we have problems? A study of history allows us to take a longer view than 24/7 media allows. We're grateful for this study of the Civil War.

Barbara Gose

On Friday, Dec. 7th, six of us meet at the Driftwood Inn in Baggs to discuss Parts 5 and 6 of America's War, "War and Freedom," and "Images of War." Perhaps it was the cold day outside and the cozy atmosphere inside, as we sipped our tea, coffee, and cocoa, but we had a lively and wide-ranging discussion, as we brought our Civil War series to an end. We began by returning to the short story, "Shiloh," as a member had questions about it. Afterwards, we discussed the Emancipation Proclamation and the continuing dismantlement of slavery, Frederick Douglass's "Men of Color, to Arms," his address to the newly enlisted Massachusetts' black soldiers, brought on a discussion of *Glory*, the Denzel Washington film about the black regiment, and the problems black soldiers faced in the war. We talked about the mastery of Lincoln's concise and powerful Gettysburg Address, and compared it to Everett's longer, well-received at the time but now forgotten, sermon on the Gettysburg battlefield. One of our members had seen Spielberg's *Lincoln*, and discussed how it touched on many of the topics we discussed. Lincoln's Second Inaugural address, his mastery of language, and his changing goals for the war was discussed at length. Also, Lincoln's ability to argue charmingly and civilly is shown in his letters to James Conkling and Albert Hodges, a skill we devoutly wished for today's senators and representatives. One member pointed out that the excerpt from *Jubilee* by Margaret Walker, gave her a convincing picture of newly-freed slaves' reactions and feelings. We then looked at

the pictures from "Images of War" and talked about the courage and skill of those artists who attended battles to memorialize them, hunkering down in trenches and behind trees, to draw what they saw.

We thoroughly enjoyed the Civil War series. As we touched briefly on the problems of reconstruction, everyone in the group agreed that they would love to follow up the Civil War series with books on Reconstruction. I think that would be an excellent idea!

Mary Kay Solomon

May 21 Worland 12 attended

May 22 Basin 9 attended

I asked the group to think about what overarching ideas we have gathered from our discussions and how these months might have changed the way we think about the American Civil War. I encouraged all to come to the library even if they hadn't read all last 60 pages in the anthology, and suggested they could pick and choose. "Jubilee" is fun to read. My husband and I had just returned from eight days in DC and brought back 1863 Emancipation Proclamation and the 1963 March on Washington booklets from the Am History museum. We all shared our thoughts about our Civil War and what freedom means in today's society.

We brought food and drinks to celebrate our last meeting. Someone wanted to bring small hard apples and green corn!

The weekly Vermont site reminded us what our fellow citizens were enduring this week 150 years ago. Confederacy demands tax in kind on its beleaguered citizens

<http://archive.constantcontact.com/fs153/1102264498897/archive/1113114143169.html>

It was interesting to see how different were the discussions between Worland and Basin, not necessarily because the groups were so different, but more whatever topic someone introduced. We lost a few men in both groups because they disliked main character in the novel *March*. One fellow returned for the last discussion and said afterward, he was sorry he stayed away.

I want to thank the Wyoming Humanities Council and the National Endowment for the Humanities, as well as the libraries, for making this fascinating series possible.

Claire Gabriel Dunne

Eight of us gathered at Eastern Wyoming College for the final meeting in the Civil War series. We spent a good deal of time talking about Lincoln's "Address on Colonization to a Deputation of Negroes," remarking on just how, by contemporary standards, politically incorrect his language was, and indeed, how horribly racist the whole concept was. We also remarked on how Lincoln's position with regards to slavery and also his views of the black race shifted a good deal over the course of the war. He was, as we had previously discussed, first and foremost a

politician. It was indeed striking to compare the language of the "Address" with the legalistic words of the Emancipation Proclamation, and the soaring rhetoric of the Gettysburg Address. Lincoln, it seems was who he needed to be, when he needed to be.

We discussed on area of the Emancipation Proclamation that often goes unremarked upon, namely, how the liberation of the slaves applied only to the states, and areas of those states, in open rebellion against the Union. We wondered why New Orleans and other areas of Louisiana were specifically exempted from the Emancipation Proclamation; we speculated that it was because, at the time the proclamation was issued, New Orleans and those other areas were under Union control. Other exempted areas included the counties of Virginia that ultimately went on to form West Virginia, as well as certain other counties in Virginia. Not mentioned at all were the border states of Tennessee and Kentucky, as well as any states or territories in the West, particularly the contentious areas of Missouri and Kansas. In effect, then, slavery was still allowed in those areas that hadn't rebelled, meaning that the Emancipation Proclamation was not a universal declaration, but rather, it would seem, a wartime tool of the Union – and particularly of Lincoln – that was aimed at bringing the South to its knees. We all wondered why this crucial element of the Proclamation was given so little play in all our memories of learning about the Civil War in school and even in this series.

We enjoyed the excerpt from the novel *Jubilee*. What were the freed slaves to do, we wondered. After a lifetime of bondage, to be turned loose and told they were free – but with no idea of where to go, no money to get there, and nothing waiting for them when they got there (wherever "there" was), what were they supposed to do? Small wonder, then, that so many remained in the South, many of them even on the same land where formerly they had been enslaved. It wasn't until later that a mass migration of blacks to northern cities occurred. We wondered what became of the freed slaves following along in the train of the Union army, and several of us thought we'd be interested in reading the rest of the novel.

We also talked about the bravery of the black soldiers in the war. Many of them marched into battle knowing they would be summarily executed if they were captured. We talked about how, despite all Frederick Douglass' sweeping rhetoric and also the petition of blacks in Tennessee covered in this section as to how serving in the fight would enable blacks to take their place as full citizens in the republic, the military was not integrated until the 50s, and the US as a whole not until the 60s. So many sacrifices seemed to be for naught for so long. Several of the participants had memories of segregation in Wyoming in the 50s, and there were various anecdotes participants had about travels in both the South and northern cities, and the examples of blatant segregation they encountered there. We reflected on how such conditions occurred within living memory, despite the bloodshed of the Civil War.

On the whole, while I wouldn't say that we arrived at any final sweeping conclusions about the Civil War over the

course of this series, but it was highly enjoyable for all participants (of the reading series that I have participated in so far, this was the one that had the most consistent attendance on the part of the participants). We did remark on how this series really delved into areas and people of that era that standard histories don't generally touch, and several of the participants said they would be doing more reading on their own, which I think is the best indication that the series was a success.

Court Merrigan

Session 5: War and Freedom 5/9/13 @ 7pm, Albany Co.

Our final meeting of the Civil War reading group in Laramie went well, with something in the ballpark of 15 participants. We were joined by Jason Burge from the Wyoming Humanities Council, as well as our favorite canine participant, Jack the giant dog.

I began by drawing some parallels to the previous session where much of our focus was on the Civil War in relation to international history, especially the question of possible British and French involvement. This time the international aspects of the Civil War came up in relation to the question of colonization of newly freed African Americans. We discussed Lincoln's address on colonization, and a bit about the details of the plan and its history. One of our participants gave an impromptu lecture on Lincoln's longstanding support of the colonization plan and other racist anti-slavery positions. Other members of the group concluded that this was, once again, evidence that Lincoln was—for better or worse—a consummate politician.

I played a recording of the Fisk Jubilee singers' rendition of the African American Spiritual "Been in the Storm So Long," which inspired the title of the history of emancipation that we read an excerpt of this week. The sound quality was poorer than I expected, but I think people got a sense of the profound longing that this song captures, as well as its musical complexity. We talked about the role of these songs in slave life, not only as coded messages to aid in escape, but also as a source of spiritual support. One of our members pointed to recent research showing that people in trying circumstances do better when they reach out to a god or higher power of some sort.

As a group I think we were most interested in the various descriptions we got in the readings about how the news of emancipation reached previously enslaved peoples, and what the variety of reactions were or might be. In some cases it was many months before the news arrived, and not everyone seemed to care all that much. More important than some abstract "freedom," for many, was the possibility of tracking down or being found by absent love ones.

We spent a bit of time discussing scientific racism, and the biological bases (or lack thereof) for "race" as a category at all. One group member pointed out the fact that DNA testing has that there is no biological basis to race; another was invested in the idea that African Americans are inherently more athletic, a claim which several group members disputed.

All in all a good session; although the discussion started out a bit more slowly than previous meetings, I would say it wound up as spirited as ever. "Making Sense of the American Civil War" was a great program and we ended with a big round of applause for WY Humanities Council and the Albany County Library, especially Kathy Marquis.

Erin Forbes

Twelve people gathered at the Powell Branch Library to discuss a collection of readings focused on the Civil War. This was the fifth and final installment of the Civil War Series. This discussion's readings focused on the last few years of the war. They were from the anthology, "America's War," which has been our text for most of our discussions. We read Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, Gettysburg Address, Second Inaugural Address, and letters. The group also responded positively to two other selections, namely "Jubilee" by Margaret Walker and the Petition to the Union Convention of Tennessee Assembled in the Capitol at Nashville. As we concluded this discussion series, we had a fun time ranging through quite a few topics. We discussed the skill of Lincoln's writing. We agreed that Frederick Douglass is a charismatic and poignant writer. We discussed the notion of honor and reputation in terms of the life and career of Robert E. Lee. We continued to marvel at Lincoln's persona, writing, speeches and such. We discussed more recent political figures in comparison to Lincoln. We discussed Bill Clinton and Winston Churchill, for example, as we tried to identify what makes a successful politician and speechmaker. We all agreed that the series made us want to learn more about these Civil War figures. We also noted that the series pushed each member of the group toward specific interests. Some of us want to explore more about certain figures, certain wars, or certain issues, like poverty or reconstruction or slavery. With this in mind, we also discussed the overall goal of the series. We agreed that is was a good start for us all as we reacquaint and explore issues the Civil War, some of which we knew, and much of which we only knew at a surface level. This series was a seed for further exploration—many in the group discussed other books that they have ordered to continue the search through history. On an overall level, we liked the Civil War series. We might have preferred to read complete books rather than excerpted selections. It's sometimes difficult to work through ten different selections in one discussion, only because each person in the group tends to want to respond to different readings, and the string of discussion weaves around quickly and widely, which can be fun and messy.