Dennis E. Frye Visiting Scholar of Civil War Studies Report

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"Fire on the Mountain, Death in the Valley"

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First, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to both Dennis Frye and the George Tyler Moore Center for the Study of the Civil War for allowing me to participate in this year's seminar. It truly was an amazing experience and made a deep impact on me as both a scholar and a lover of Civil War history in general. I feel that it would be redundant for me to use this report to simply give a day-by-day summary of the seminar, nor would that be able to express my thoughts in a very effective way. Instead, I will focus on a few important moments for me that made me think about my work, scholarship as a whole, and the nature of the Civil War in general.

Currently, I study Civil War newspapers. My workspace is my laptop on an online database or in the microfilm corner in Gorgas Library at The University of Alabama. I do not get to look at battlefields, nor in many ways do I need to. My work focuses on the way reporters and editors interpreted battles and how these varied interpretations were impacted by things like party, location, and proximity to the fighting. When I begin research on a new campaign, I will sit down with some well-reviewed battle histories and read until I think I understand the battle enough to read a press reports and know the difference between fact and purposefully skewed fiction. The more I work on this, the more I realize sometimes simply knowing who won the battle is enough to discredit some particularly partisan correspondents.

Battlefields represent a small and in many ways abstract part of my research, yet the seminar demonstrated how crucial they actually are. As Dennis pointed out, you cannot understand a battlefield until you walk it. I can read about Antietam or the Overland campaign in a dozen books and never fully grasp the complexity of the terrain and the difficulties presented by that. Furthermore, I read books written a hundred or so years after the last shots were fired, by historians who have painstakingly reconstructed the events of one single battle. They know the

full scope of the violence, the placement of the troops, and the orders that were followed and those that were not. Because of this, I know those things too.

But the men at the time did not. They were confused, scared, and disoriented. Even the correspondents I study could not have been everywhere at once. They were more than likely high on a hill watching the movements of troops as mere observers, following the commander or, at best, moving to the edge of a particularly intense sector to get a better look without too much risk of being shot. They did not have a complete picture of events, even when it was their job to build one. Therefore, their reports must be read knowing they too were wrapped up in the smoke and the confusion, and no matter how hard you try you cannot see through a mountain. There are many things about the battles these men covered that they simply did not know, but the public demanded news, and so they supplied it.

Perhaps I knew this before the seminar. It certainly is a logical conclusion. But seeing the ground myself, walking the undulating hills has made this an ever-present thought in my research; what did these correspondents actually know, what did they invent, and what does the nature of those inventions tell me about how they viewed the war? Despite this, some reports are completely incorrect and skewed and this owes nothing to the confusing terrain. For instance, no matter how hard one tries to see otherwise, Cemetery Ridge is not a mountain, and Lee did not drive the Union five miles back from that position before being turned away on 3 July as some Confederate reporters would have us believe. Far from being a hindrance to my research however, this new concept of justifiable confusion or blatant lying opens up a new direction for it to progress. I now want to study the fields and the correspondents' own positions and orientations to gain a better idea of what they saw and what they did not. While this certainly can make much of their reports hearsay, the parts that they witnessed and embellish will serve to

solidify my argument about their biased views of the battles. Put simply, if a correspondent witnessed the failure of Lee's 3 July assault, and then reported it a smashing but unsupported success, clearly there is something else at play that I can examine further.

Aside from my own work, walking the battlefield inspired thoughts about scholarship in general. In the study of the Civil War, the day of the great battle history is largely past. In the publish or perish environment, writing a compelling and digestible history of a battle will get you nowhere, unless you have built up your scholarly credentials enough to avoid serious criticism for a work of this nature. I do not necessarily have a problem with this, and not simply because I know I am no Bruce Catton. I think as scholars we are progressing towards answering not just the question of what happened, but also why, how, and what these events mean on a broader level.

That is not to say that we should ignore the 'what' question. It seems that more and more scholars are only seeking answers to new questions without knowing the answers to the old ones themselves. Some in the profession may mock the proverbial Civil War buff, but unless we too have factual knowledge, how can we answer deeper questions? I was remarkably impressed by the detailed knowledge of all of our guides, while also being slightly ashamed at my sometimes great lack of familiarity with parts of the field. I wanted to learn, and I was certainly not disappointed in that endeavor, but as an aspiring professional scholar I was struck with the thought that in my training, we do not discuss the facts of these engagements very often, if at all. Certainly we are told to read, and read a lot. But the main aspect of that is to build up a historiographical base, who wrote what when, what did they say, and are they right. We read history, but often we are not looking for facts, we are looking for an argument.

I can think of a few recently published works where their arguments are compelling until you consider the overarching facts of the situations they discuss. A new trend is to examine the impact of emancipation on the Union Army. I find this very compelling, but when authors point to emancipation as the sole cause for a spike in Union desertions in early 1863 while ignoring Fredericksburg and the Mud March, I find their analysis lacking to say the least. As a group, perhaps we need to spend more time on the fields we study. Our task is to humanize past events, but if we do not understand those events, we are doing a disservice to those we study.

While this seminar sparked many questions for me, the most important reactions I experienced were of a more emotional quality. Walking the field reminded me that we study people. To be sure, I was not unaware of this before I followed Burnside's troops across the bridge or Hooker's men through the Cornfield. Yet somehow these experiences produced a more visceral reaction than I was expecting.

This first occurred in Fox's Gap by the Wise farm and more forcefully on the Mumma Farm on the Antietam field. These farmers had their lives torn apart by a war they had little to nothing to do with. It made me think about those who had history done to them. These people were passive actors in devastating events. They were not a part of the event so much as the event was forced upon them by circumstance. Certainly environmental historians are beginning the grapple with the destruction of farms during the war, and histories are waiting to be written about the farmers whose names dot out battle histories, but for me the experience was more emotional than intellectual. I could not imagine the chaos these farmers had to feel during the fighting. Fear, anger, and relief all must have been mixed as they watched their lives being trampled underfoot and under falling bodies. These feelings only intensified when we discussed the men doing the fighting.

Sears's depiction of the fighting in *Landscape Turned Red* is amazing. The horror and the triumph is beautifully described, but it is not the same as seeing the road men walked on to go die for their country. During the seminar, we followed the assault path of the 5th Maryland at Antietam. We walked the rolling hills, keeping an eye on the monument as we went. We came into a low valley, lost sight of its obelisk, and then crested the hill where it sat. As we pulled even to the monument, below us sat the bloody lane. I did not know it was there, nor did the Marylanders when they marched the same route. For me, it was a shock. For them, it was the last thing they saw. I could almost see the sheet of flame that must have erupted from the lane when the Union troops came over the hill. I thought about the staccato nature of the death that happened on that small knoll. Sudden and quick. One unlucky assignment and a poor position to attack from, and a unit took 60 percent casualties, an example of the cruel mathematics of war. You do not get that feeling from a book.

Additionally, I was lucky enough to sit down with Dennis on the New York monument and look east towards the Union position and the mountains behind it. I was truly struck by the beauty of the landscape and the silence surrounding us. As we talked, we considered the nature of war in such a picturesque setting, the remarkable juxtaposition between the rolling hills planted with corn and the unimaginable violence men perpetrated on each other. War brings out the worst in human nature, and we can read about it as much as we want but until we are able to sit and look at where it took place, it is hard to comprehend. Battlefields remind us that real men walked the now cleared trails, they burned now standing barns, and the died on now quiet hillsides. I have thought about these things, about how the ground plays a part in war, about the men who fought, but walking the field, seeing the hillsides and the gun emplacements brings a new reality that we cannot find in academia.

Finally, I was struck by the people around me, both the other members of the seminar and the families crowding the battlefield. I thought about Carl Becker and his definition of history as "the memory of things said and done," and for many the memory of a war or a battle is preserved through visiting the site. If I am lucky enough to complete my work and publish a book about the Civil War press, it is unlikely a family of four from Missouri will read it. I like to think my work is fruitful and important, but for most, it probably is not. Their experience of the Civil War is a battlefield, and I think that is tremendously important. As professional historians, we do not always reach the audience we want, but public history keeps the past alive and when it is done well it allows for the progress professional scholars make to be disseminated to an audience that will not pick up our books. It takes both, and Antietam exemplifies the union of the two.

This experience is one I will treasure. The people and met, the things I learned, and the places I visited will continue to influence the way I think about history and the way I conduct my studies. I cannot thank Dennis Frye or Dr. Jim Broomall and Jennifer Alarcon at the George Tyler Moore Center enough for presenting me with this opportunity. I look forward to returning soon.

Thank you,

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