

THE WILMER COLLECTION OF CIVIL WAR NOVELS

There is at the Library of the University of North Carolina an unusually interesting, if not unique, collection of books known as the Wilmer Collection of Civil War Novels. It was presented to the Library in 1946 by the Rev. Richard H. Wilmer, Jr., Ph.D., Chaplain of the University of the South, Sewanee.

Dr. Wilmer began collecting Civil War novels in 1936 while a student at Yale University. His interest in this field stemmed from a discussion with a classmate concerning the large number of novels dealing with the Civil War published in the 1930's. After a brief survey of the Library of Congress' catalogue, he found to his surprise that a great many novels had been written on this theme beginning as early as the second year of the War. The investigation whetted his interest to the extent that he rapidly became a confirmed collector of Civil War novels.

At the outset Dr. Wilmer adopted for his guide to collecting in this field the rule that he would define as a Civil War novel any novel which used the war as its subject or motivating influence. He persevered consistently in his collecting until he joined the United States Navy as a Chaplain in 1942. When he gave his collection to the University of North Carolina Library it numbered 496 titles. Every title in it was a first edition. Many of them, however, never went beyond one edition.

Describing how he felt about his collection, Dr. Wilmer wrote in the *Colophon*, Autumn, 1938: "I love them all, impossible juveniles, sentimental outburst of the E. P. Roe period, far Southern issuances from still embattled, deeply ingrained hearts; literature great and small, good and bad, I love it all. My collection will never be complete. Compared with fine collections, it is but a poor relative seated at the great banquet of books; and yet for all the filthy grubbing, the disappointment of finding wretched reprints, the expense, which, while not great for some, has hampered me adequately—for all this, I have no regret."

When donating his collection to the University Library Dr. Wilmer specified that it should be kept as a unit; that it should be made available to students; that new titles should be added as they were published; and that out-of-print titles which he had not been able to obtain should be searched for and secured when available. The Library accepted the gift on these terms and has faithfully adhered to them. Since receiving the collection in 1946, 124 titles of current and out-of-print Civil War novels have been added. The collection is housed as a unit in a special section of the Library's air-conditioned stacks. It has been used by students in the fields of American literature and American history. A graduate student, who won his Ph.D. in History in 1950, used the collection as the principal source for his dissertation.

The quality of the books in the collection run the literary gamut from dime novels to the classic of Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage*. About one-fifth of the collection is made up of juveniles by such popular authors as William T. Adams, better known as Oliver Optic; Charles Fosdick, whose pseudonym was Harry Castlemon, and Joseph A. Altsheeler. The Civil War has been a popular theme for juveniles from the publication of Charles Fosdick's *Frank on a Gun-Boat* in 1864 to that of Walter D. Edmonds' *Cadmus Henry* in 1949.

Among the writers for adults the collection contains such well-known names as John Esten Cooke, Thomas Dixon, Stephen Crane, Ellen Glasgow, Stark Young, William Faulkner and Margaret Mitchell.

The publication of Civil War novels began as early as 1862 with such titles as *Fort Lafayette: or Love and Secession*, by Benjamin Wood; and *Among the Pines: or South in Secession-Times*, by James R. Gilmore, and continued throughout the course of the

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war. Many more novels were written in the Northern states during the war than in the Southern. Three were written and published in the Confederacy during the war period which are worthy of mention: *The Aid-de-Camp: a romance of the war*, by James Dabney McCabe, Jr. (Richmond, 1863); *Raids and Romance of Morgan and his Men*, by Sally Rochester Ford (Mobile, 1864), and *Macaria*, by Augusta Jane Evans Wilson (Richmond, 1864).

Among other interesting titles in the collection are two by Jules Verne: *Les Forceurs de Blocus* (Paris, 1872) and *Nord contre Sud* (Paris, 1887).

The great majority of the titles in the Wilmer Collection are not "rare books" in the sense that they would bring high prices in the rare book market, but many of them are the sort of titles which are most difficult to locate. The Library has a want-list of about 200 titles for which it is currently searching. The collection, numbering 620 different titles, is the largest of its kind in the world. It is a distinct addition to this Library's growing collection of printed and manuscript materials relating to the Civil War. The University of North Carolina Library is justifiably proud that Dr. Wilmer chose to place his collection of Civil War Novels in its keeping.

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