

ANALYSIS

Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty (1867)



John W. DeForest

(1826-1906)

“The distinction...of writing the first American novel which may be called realistic in a modern sense belongs to John W. DeForest, whose *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty* (1867), as William Dean Howells said, was ‘of an advanced realism before realism was known by that name.’ Not half heroic or partisan enough to suit the contemporary feeling about the war, *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* missed the vogue of a war book, and when the tendency in fiction had caught up with it, it seemed too much a war book to fit the new taste. But no other novel of the decade has been less dimmed by a half century of realism. Coldly truthful in its descriptions of battles and camps, crisp and pointed in its dialogue, penetrating, if not over-subtle, in its character analysis, sensible in its plot and in its general temper, it is still almost as convincing as it was once precocious. DeForest wrote other novels but none quite so notable. All of them suffered from the rivalry of local color in its romantic phases.”

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(Macmillan 1921-68) 117-18

“At the outbreak of the Civil War, Dr. Ravenel, a scholar who is loyal to the Union, leaves New Orleans for ‘New Boston’ (New Haven, Conn.). With his daughter Lillie, whose sympathies lie with the aristocratic South, he grows concerned at the entrance into the girl’s life of two suitors: Edward Colburne, an intelligent but modest New Boston lawyer; and Lieutenant-Colonel John Carter, a Virginia-born soldier in the Union army, whose dashing manners and aristocratic tendencies match her ideal of Southern manhood. Dr. Ravenel prefers Colburne, an Abolitionist like himself, and fears Carter’s reputation for dissipation and lack of scruples. Meanwhile Lillie’s conversion has begun, and she has a vital interest in the Northern success when Colburne and Carter participate in the capture of New Orleans. Soon the Ravenels return to their old home, and Carter gives up his life of drink and mistresses to court Lillie and intrigue for promotion. After their marriage, he remains faithful for a time, but during a trip to Washington has a secret affair with her gay young aunt, Mrs. Larue. This ends with the birth of Lillie’s son, but Dr. Ravenel, now engaged in the education of freed slaves, learns of Carter’s infidelity and informs his daughter, who leaves her husband shortly before he dies as a hero in battle. At the close of the war, Lillie is converted to Abolitionism through her return to New Boston and her marriage to Colburne.”

James D. Hart

“A more important novelist than [Oliver Wendell] Holmes was John W. DeForest (1826-1906), perhaps the most unjustly neglected of all American writers... It is often said that DeForest failed to win popular[ity] because most of the novel-readers of his time were women, and women could not forgive him for the way he handled them in his novels. If this is true, it reflects very adversely upon the honesty and intelligence of our grandmothers. It is true that DeForest has a sizable gallery of female eccentrics, whom he often ‘tags’ amusingly in the Dickens manner.... Lillie, the rebel who is converted to the Union cause in the course of the war, is worthy...in the main (though she is certainly silly at times), but contemporary readers may have felt that DeForest had soiled her by marrying her to the essentially worthless Colonel Carter, with his coarse animal glamour, before bringing her in the end to her true love, Captain Colburne.... It is perfectly clear that DeForest’s unfavorable portraits of women spring merely from his honesty and penetration and not at all from any animus against women as such....

Beautifully wrought as *Kate Beaumont* (1872) is, DeForest produced an even finer book in *Miss Ravenel’s Conversion from Secession to Loyalty* (1867). Colonel Carter has recently been compared to Rhett Butler in Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*. The panoramic sweep of the book suggests *Gone with the Wind* also, though its spirit is very different. Into this novel DeForest poured his own experiences of battle—quite invalidating the familiar claim that Stephen Crane was the first writer to break with the romantic tradition in stories of war—and his wide experience of life and knowledge of character, both north and south. This book alone would suffice to establish DeForest’s claim both for historic importance and absolute achievement in the field of the American novel. His work might well be tagged Exhibit A in the museum of American literature to refute the comfortable claim that all good books somehow find the readers they deserve automatically.”

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel:
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century
(Holt 1952) 104-08

“The Union defeat at Bull Run convinced him that the war was more serious than he had at first thought it was going to be, and he set about recruiting in New Haven a company of volunteers. Though he never rose to a higher rank than captain, he spent six and a half years in the army... His style, always rather impassive, has now hardened into something quite Roman... The military parts of this novel...constituted a real piece of pioneering in the treatment of war in fiction. DeForest seems to have read *The Charterhouse of Parma*, with its realistic description, in its time unconventional because totally non-heroic, of the battle of Waterloo, in which Stendhal had taken part.... Stephen Crane, in *The Red Badge of Courage*...may...have been influenced by DeForest.... The war scenes in *Miss Ravenel’s Conversion* were the first of their kind in fiction in English, and it would be more than a decade, so far as I know, before any other writer of talent who had taken an active part in the war would describe it with equal realism....

Miss Ravenel was originally intended to appear as a serial in *Harper’s Monthly*, which had been publishing DeForest’s war articles, but its harshness made the editor [apprehensive]. ‘I make no objection,’ wrote DeForest, ‘to your moral reform of the story. If it goes into the *Monthly* of course it ought to be made proper for families. Only I think it ought to be understood, for the sake of [realism], that the Colonel did frequently swear and that the Louisiana lady was not quite as good as she should be.’ Even the admiring Howells, writing thirty-four years after the book had been published, complains that this Louisiana lady is ‘very lurid’ and says that he cannot think of her ‘without shuddering.’ It has been claimed as an achievement for DeForest that he was the first American novelist who dared to let a ‘bad woman’ go unpunished....

DeForest made a brave new beginning in his attempt to rescue war from heroics and sexual relations from sentimentality, and it is true that he suffered, like Cable, from the censorship of publishers and editors... And one even finds *Miss Ravenel’s Conversion*, DeForest’s most ambitious work, a little disappointing, a little dull. The characters are correctly described, but one never feels the least excitement as to what is going to happen to them.... His weakness as a novelist is that he himself carried into his

fiction a little too much of New Haven: its coldness and sternness and stiffness.... DeForest's style, though firm, sure and accurate, now an excellent style in its way—it has improved since his earlier writings—is of a kind that almost completely excludes not only the nuances of atmosphere and the vibrations of unspoken feeling, but also the real pulse of emotion.... And though he is interested in different sorts of people and is able to present a whisky-drinking Virginian or a promiscuous Creole lady with a detachment that is not provincial, the structure of his moral world is built upon Puritan girders.... He cannot get into his narrative very much of the color or movement of life. The incidents of *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* do not pass before the reader with the unexpected naturalness of *War and Peace*.”

Edmund Wilson
Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War
(1962; Oxford/Galaxy 1966) 682, 684-85, 687-89

Michael Hollister (2015)