

## Letter From the Lower Right

by John Shelton Reed

### Mississippi Musing



Back in February, a *USA Today* story on black historical sites mentioned a "Black Confederate Memorial" in Canton, Mississippi, a "20-foot obelisk . . . built in 1894 to honor Harvey's Scouts, one of the black units that operated behind Union lines to harass supply shipments." As it happened, I read that story while spending some time in Jackson, 20 miles or so south of Canton. Visions of a lucrative screenplay dancing in my head, I set out through a chilly February rain to find the monument.

Canton turned out to be a pleasant county seat that Sherman somehow neglected to burn (unlike Jackson, which was known as "Chimneyville" when old Cump got through with it). I drove past a charming little Episcopal church and a number of imposing houses from the days of King Cotton to the classic courthouse square, where I asked several citizens, black and white, where their nationally advertised monument could be found. None of them knew anything about it. Finally, a lady in a gift shop on the square thought she might know what I was looking for (at least she knew what an "obelisk" is), and I followed her directions to the edge of town. Sure enough, there it was, surrounded by a cast iron railing. I got out and trudged through the drizzle for a closer look.

The inscriptions on the base were worn almost to illegibility, and I had to smear them with some cold mud before I could read the words. The first was straightforward enough ("Loyal Faithful True / Were Each and All of Them"), but the next read, "Erected by W.H. Howcott to the Memory of the Good and Loyal Servants Who Followed the Fortunes of Harvey Scouts During the Civil War." Hmmm. Did *USA Today* get it wrong? Surely not. But the last inscription clinched it. "A Tribute to My Faithful Servant and

Friend, Willis Howcott," it said. "A Colored Boy of Rare Loyalty and Faithfulness, Whose Memory I Cherish With Deep Gratitude. / W.H. Howcott." So much for my screenplay. It would have been a hard sell, anyway.

There are lessons here that the rest of my time in Mississippi only served to confirm, beginning with the fact that you shouldn't believe everything you hear or read about the place. Another lesson is that history is close to the surface here, but, like those inscriptions, it's not always easy to read, and once you've made it out it's not always clear what it means.

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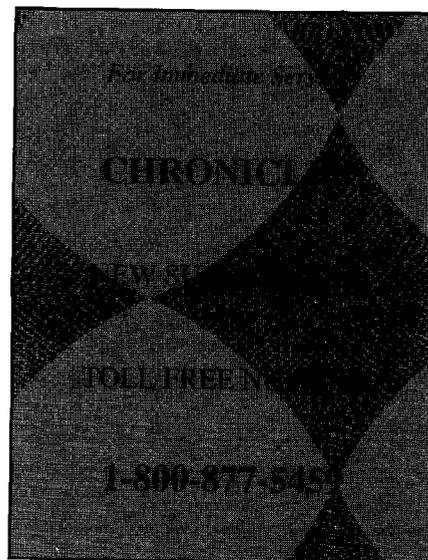
One Sunday, I drove the 45 minutes to Vicksburg. Touring the siege lines in my rented Geo Metro, half-remembered poems by Allen Tate and James Dickey floating in my head, I mused as I often do on the sheer unrecoverable *otherness* of the past. (Not for me, I'm afraid, Faulkner's famous line about its not being dead, not even past.) Surrounded by visiting Boy Scouts and Midwesterners in Winnebagos, I found it almost impossible to reconstruct the noise and heat, the smoke and blood, much less the sentiments and emotions that drove those men. And here the Park Service's otherwise excellent maps and taped commentary were no help at all.

Amid the grandiose monuments erected by various northern states to their veterans I almost missed the modest marker for a West Virginia unit. West-by-God-Virginia. What prompted those mountain boys to come all this way to fight, and some of them to die, in the sweltering heat of a Mississippi summer? I doubt that the sentiments of Julia Ward Howe's pious battle hymn had much to do with it. Hatred for the haughty lowlanders I could believe, or even just the adventure of it, and once you've begun it's hard to quit. But how about the good and loyal servants of the Harvey Scouts? What could have been in *their* minds, as they helped their masters fight the blue-belly invaders? Could it have been as simple as the friendship Mr. Howcott claims? Even Howcott himself: When he put up his imposing monument to Willis and the others, whom did he want to impress? His neighbors? The Yankees of 1894? Us? How could we ever hope to know?

Of the hundreds of monuments that litter the park at Vicksburg my favorite is Missouri's. That state had sons on both sides, and the monument honors them all. At one point hostile Missouri units faced each other across a scant few yards of no-man's land. During a cease-fire, the Park Service tape informs us, an officer of the Confederate unit visited his Union counterpart across the lines. As he was leaving, the Union officer expressed the hope that they would meet again, in a restored Union. "The only union I hope to share with you, sir," his fellow-Missourian replied, "is in the Hereafter."

It's interesting to see how the park's tape and brochures and videos and monuments treat the Confederates. In general, they cleave to what I've come to think of as "the old settlement," the consensus that obtained from the 1890's until quite recently. They treat the war's outcome as providential (this is the federal Park Service, after all), but the Confederates are granted their valor and good faith. That tacit agreement is certainly under attack these days in venues other than Civil War battlefield parks, and I wonder how much longer it will last even there.

But even if the interpretations change, some inconvenient facts will remain, to keep us honest. As we think about what that war was about, and why men fought (not exactly the same question), we need to remember not only the Southerners in the Union Army but also "Northern men of Southern principles"



like General Pemberton, the Confederate commander at Vicksburg, who was a Pennsylvanian. And there's that stone obelisk in Canton, whatever it means. Things are never as simple as we might like them to be.

\* \* \*

Moving on to the town of Vicksburg itself, I surveyed the remains of that once-bustling riverport, among them many fine houses now turned into bed-and-breakfast establishments. The big news locally was that riverboat gambling has been approved, which everyone

seems to expect will revitalize the local economy. A number of other Mississippi River and Gulf Coast towns already have floating casinos, and so far the economic bonanza seems to be real enough. I don't entirely understand, however, why this Baptist-Methodist state has suddenly become so enthusiastic for this one kind of gambling. It must be something like Harry Golden's scheme for "vertical integration." Golden noticed that Southern whites insisted on segregation only for activities that involved blacks and whites sit-

ting together, so he proposed taking the seats out of restaurants, schools, and buses. Just so, gambling seems to be OK in Mississippi only if you're afloat. (My favorite example is the Splash Casino, on a boat moored in some sort of bog in land-locked Tunica County, where the managers now have a problem because the water level is falling. I picture guys with garden hoses trying to get it back up before the state inspector arrives with his dipstick.)

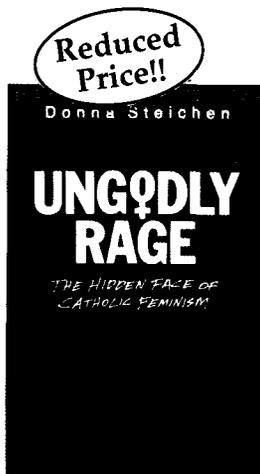
Anyway, no visitor to Vicksburg should miss a curious little museum in the old courthouse building. A half-dozen cluttered rooms display relics of native Indians and of prominent local families, mementos of the cave-dwelling days during the siege, Coca-Cola memorabilia (the first Coke was supposedly bottled in Vicksburg), the Louisiana banknote with the word "Dix" (by one theory the origin of the word "Dixieland"), photographs of steamboat races and famous roustabouts, and literally hundreds of other souvenirs of Vicksburg life. I was reminded by this delightful omnium gatherum of Shane Leslie's description of the museum in Reading at the turn of the century: a relic looted from a nearby abbey at the Reformation was displayed in a glass case, labeled "Hand of Saint James."

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When my wife came to visit, I took her back to Vicksburg, and we had Sunday dinner at a restaurant high on a bluff over the Mississippi, next to one of the Confederate artillery emplacements that had failed to keep the Yankee gunboats from slipping past in the dark of one fateful night. Below us, the Interstate spanned the great river now, carrying 18-wheelers and tourists west to Texas and beyond, and the river traffic was confined to barges. As we were leaving, I noticed among the signed pictures of celebrities in the foyer one of Alex Haley—another Southerner who tried to make the past speak and who (it now appears) finally had to put words in its mouth.

*John Shelton Reed has returned to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, from Millsaps College in Jackson, where he was Eudora Welty Professor of Southern Studies. His latest book, My Tears Spoiled My Aim and Other Reflections on Southern Culture, was recently published by the University of Missouri Press.*

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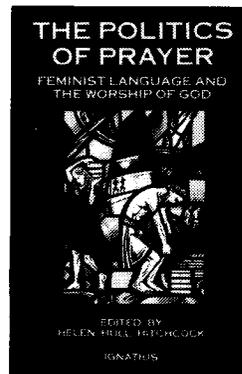
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COMMONWEAL



Anna Mueck-Wlodzicki

## The Merchants of Death of Sunset Boulevard

by Bill Kauffman

### Who Owned Hollywood?

Playwright Robert Sherwood, the six-foot-seven weather vane of mid-century liberalism, once complained, "The trouble with me is that I start off with a big message and end with nothing but good entertainment." That's no trouble at all, as writer-director Preston Sturges insisted in his wonderful film *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), but then Sherwood was unduly modest. On back lots and in ginny writers' conferences, he and others in Hollywood's prewar "creative community"—I use the *Entertainment Tonight* locution—connived to turn the parochial mind-your-own-business citizens of fly-over land into battle-primed belligerents. Our shell-shocked nation has never recovered.

Adolf Hitler said of Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, "This is a film which could turn anyone into a Bolshevik." Beginning in 1939, the spectacle of our stateside Eisensteins, many of them foreign-bred, urging American natives to sacrifice their sons for Win-

ston Churchill provoked a brief, sad, and futile protest by the pugnacious guardians of the Old Republic.

Under the influence of European-born moguls, immigrant directors, and British actors, "movies have ceased to be instruments of entertainment," charged North Dakota Senator Gerald P. Nye. "They have become the most gigantic engines of propaganda in existence to rouse the war fever in America and plunge this Nation to her destruction." Nye, an agrarian populist and legendary scourge of the masters of war, was his chamber's champion muckraker. Between 1934 and 1936 he led a Senate investigation exposing the "merchants of death": those "great American and European bankers and the powerful international munitions makers" who had suckered us into the First World War, or so Nye believed. He dedicated the rest of his career to preventing a replay. Alas for poor Nye, Hollywood had retaliatory powers beyond J.P. Morgan and Company's wildest dreams.

Nye made his case in an August 1, 1941, nationwide radio address. "Before we plow a million boys under the dust and mud of Africa, Indo China, France, and far away Russia," the senator declared, we ought to examine why "movie companies have been operating as war propaganda machines almost as if they were being directed from a single central bureau." Nye named several films—among them *That Hamilton Woman*, *Man Hunt*, and *Sergeant York*—that "whip up the warrior spirit in young men, glorify militarism," and altogether ignore Sam Goldwyn's sly dictum, "If you have a message, send it Western Union."

Nye's target was clear. He was an Anglophobe, like so many Middle American populists, and he had no desire to sacrifice Dakota farmboys in order to pull the British Empire's chestnuts out of the fire. (In 1933 the North Dakota Senate had voted to secede from the Union, in part to extricate the state from the tentacular grip of the Wall Street-British octopus.) "Go to Hollywood," Nye urged his auditors in radio land. "The place swarms with refugees. It also swarms with British actors." This charming Anglophobia, though jarring to modern ears, acted as a brake on the

Wise Men. It has, regrettably, gone the way of anti-Masonry and the free coinage of silver. When we hear maledictions against Hollywood today we sniff for anti-Semitism; Nye, unfortunately, played down to our expectations by stating: "There are eight major film companies. The men who dominate policy in these companies—own or direct them—are well known to you." He then rattled them off: Louis B. Mayer, Harry and Jack Cohn, Adolph Zukor, Joseph Schenck, Arthur Loew, Sam Goldwyn . . . you get the picture. Exotic names, none too American-sounding. Most were Jewish.

The reaction was fierce and immediate. "This was deliberately cooked up for the double purpose of terrorizing the Jews on one hand to keep them from active participation in the anti-isolationist fight and on the other to arouse public prejudice against the interventionist cause on the Jew Angle," fumed the prolix hawk Robert S. Allen.

Braving a hailstorm of vilification, Nye and his senatorial confrere Burton K. Wheeler arranged subcommittee hearings to investigate the propaganda activities of the motion picture and radio industries. Nye, a scrapper, kicked things off by asserting that the film industry was run by men "born abroad and animated by the persecutions and hatreds of the Old World." Many directors "come from Russia, Hungary, Germany, and the Balkan countries." (This was true, by the way, if veracity matters.) Applying to anti-Semitism his most stinging epithet—"un-American"—Nye insisted that "those primarily responsible for the propaganda pictures are born abroad. They came to our land and took citizenship here entertaining violent animosities toward certain causes abroad. . . . If they lose sight of what some Americans might call the first interests of America in times like these, I can excuse them. But their prejudices by no means necessitate our closing our eyes to these interests and refraining from undertaking to correct their error."

Nye's economic determinism led him to look at the export market for films. "If Britain loses, seven of the eight leading companies will be wiped out." The question, then, was this: "Are you ready