

The Role of Historic Novels in Understanding Desertion in the Civil War

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by  
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In 1862 John Esten Cooke, a Confederate officer and later novelist, witnessed a young man accused of desertion, admit to it, and be sentenced to death by General J.E.B. Stuart. General Stuart was one of the most respected generals of the entire Confederacy and played integral parts in several major battles, including Gettysburg. Of Stuart's sentiments towards desertion, Cooke wrote, "Desertion...[is] one of the deadliest crimes which a human being could be guilty."<sup>1</sup> Once the unnamed officer realized he had been condemned to be hanged on a tree, he started begging and pleading to be saved. He claimed he had left for Maryland and been forced to fight against the South because he had nothing to eat. Stuart hesitated after hearing his story and then turned the matter over to General Lee who, Cooke claimed, only inflicted the death penalty when he could not avoid doing so.<sup>2</sup>

In 1863, George H. Gordon, a Union soldier, witnessed the execution of a ringleader of a group of deserters. The other five had been pardoned by the President and returned to their respective units, but the instigator had been condemned to death. As the corpse was rolled into the prepared coffin, Gordon commented, "The law had been defied and so, at last, at the law was vindicated."<sup>3</sup>

These are not isolated and chance incidents; desertion was prevalent throughout the Civil War, regardless of which army men fought for, and the punishments were usually harsh. With almost 4 million men enlisted in the Union Army, there were almost 200,000 recorded cases of desertion during the four years of war. In the Confederate Army, desertion was even more prevalent, with 103,400 deserters out of an army only 600,000-700,000 strong.<sup>4</sup> While these

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Bushnell Hart, ed. *The Romance of the Civil War* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1903), 141.

<sup>2</sup> Hart, 144.

<sup>3</sup> Hart, 159.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas L. Livermore, *Numbers & Losses in the Civil War in America: 1861-1865* (New York: Kraus Reprint, 1969), 5, 48; Mark A. Weitz, *More Damning Than Slaughter: Desertion in the Confederate Army* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), ix; Ella Lonn, *Desertion during the Civil War* (Gloucester, Massachusetts: P. Smith, 1928), 154.

statistics mean over 5% of the Union Army deserted, most historians have come to believe that the desertion rate in the Union Army was much higher, as high as 9.6%.<sup>5</sup> For the Confederate army the statistics are even higher, with just fewer than 15% of the Confederate Army deserting.<sup>6</sup> With such high punishments and repercussions for deserting for many men who volunteered to fight for what they thought was the right cause, what still would motivate men to desert?

Before that question can be addressed, we need to look at why men volunteered to fight because those reasons are an important factor to understand. Historians cite hundreds of causes for why the Civil War was fought, and are especially focused on what motivated men to participate in such a bloody war. These motivations can be described as a “complex mixture of patriotism, ideology, concepts of duty, honor, manhood, and community or peer pressure.”<sup>7</sup> By delving deeper into these motivations we gain an understanding of what men chose to value and what convinced them to become soldiers in the army. After those motivations have been clearly dissected and analyzed, it then becomes important to remember that almost 10% of those men left the army at some point during the war, of their own accord. The reasons that encouraged them to begin fighting clearly didn’t stay important enough to make them stay, so it will be interesting to look at why that is.

While desertion is a tough topic to tackle, several historians have come up with different conclusions. Ella Lonn in 1928 started the first major discussion about the issue of desertion in the Civil War. She claimed that desertion was a huge problem, calling it the greatest evil.<sup>8</sup> Even though she justified various reasons for men to desert and she acknowledged that it was not likely to be solved easily, she still found the men who desert subject to the temptation, and called

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<sup>5</sup> Weitz, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Livermore, 5; Weitz, 6.

<sup>7</sup> James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 13.

<sup>8</sup> Lonn, 21.

them cowards for leaving the army.<sup>9</sup> Mark Weitz in 2005 did extensive research into desertion in the Confederacy, and found from his research that desertion was not the reason the Confederacy fell, but it certainly contributed to it, starting in 1862 when supplies and willpower were starting to be depleted already. Weitz is also of the opinion that the Confederacy should have started executing deserters far earlier in the war than they did. He thinks this would have saved the Confederacy from the mass exodus that took place all over the South. Desertion worked as a disease and “in the end hurt much more than slaughter.”<sup>10</sup> Men saw others leaving for home and decided to leave as well; there was strength in numbers. In Foote’s 1952 novel, *Shiloh*, this same idea is shown as one man watches hundreds of his fellow soldiers walk away from battle because it is just too much for them to handle.<sup>11</sup>

Both of the stories at the beginning of the essay came from *The Romance of the Civil War*, a book full of primary sources from the Civil War, edited for use as a primary reader for children at the turn of the century. This makes in an interesting source, both from a literary view and from a primary source view. What Americans think of desertion has certainly changed in the last 150 years and while each case is still circumstantial and should be individually judged, insight can be gained by exploring the literary works of the last century and a half. Several novels are examples of their time and will be analyzed later, including *The Flag on the Hilltop* (1902), *Shiloh* (1952), *A Dream of Kings* (1955), and *Cold Mountain* (1998). Comparing the experiences of the actual deserters and soldiers of the Civil War and the way writers have displayed them in general fiction allows a truth about desertion, that it was not always dishonorable, to seep through. This is not something that is easily understood by reading

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<sup>9</sup> Lonn, 225.

<sup>10</sup> Weitz, 294.

<sup>11</sup> Shelby Foote, *Shiloh* (New York: Dial Press, 1952), 97.

statistics; sometimes the facts are not enough to understand what occurred, and that is where historical fiction is useful.

“Truth” in historical novels does not always need to be true in the sense that the works correspond exactly to specific historical events. However, in order for these fictions to feel correct and to be respected as good sources of feeling and emotion of the time, they must carry some element of historical truth. Philosopher Richard Rorty reasoned that “...finding a description of all things characteristic of your time of which you most approve, with which you unflinchingly identify, a description which will serve as a description of the end toward which the historical developments which led up to your time were means” is the way to determine if something is good history and true.<sup>12</sup> For Rorty, good history is characterized by retrospect reflection. Relativity to present day gives the history meaning and thus gives it truth. There can be problems with reflecting back on history with your own lens of history, mainly that you can misinterpret what really happened. But without this personal reflection and mirror or lens of what the history means, it is pointless to know the past because it is not relevant to you. However, one must be careful not to read things into the past that didn’t exist. For instance, you cannot expect Civil War-era Americans to have had a liberal and modern view of racial equality, but you can find the seeds of such ideas developing even back then. It would be bad historical analysis to assume races should have been thought of as equal, but to notice the movements forming is the best way to look at history and truth.

In the end there are two basic ways to distinguish “truth” in a novel: the feelings produced by the story are true to the history, and/or the author providing the reader with a way to relate it to the present day. Story truth and this idea that truth can permeate the experience of reading the book to give us a new or better understanding of the past are the two criteria for a

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 55.

good historic novel.<sup>13</sup> Through this understanding of truth, we will examine the chosen novels to determine if the literary portrayals are accurate, what we can learn from them if they are or aren't and finally, what does that say about the time they were written in. By juxtaposing all four books which were written across the 20<sup>th</sup> century we can gain insight into the epidemic of desertion during the Civil War, as well as the characteristics of America.

Desertion was a prevalent part of the Civil War, and it effected more of the war than most people give it credit for but it has always been a fairly taboo subject to discuss. Not until 60 years after the war did the first real historical look at the topic become published by Ella Lonn. The literary views of desertion have changed as well over time as desertion in general has become less taboo for citizens to discuss. From the sample presented, the deserting characters have become sympathetic instead of hated. As the war gets farther and farther in the past, more people are willing to explore the less glorious side to what most people romanticize as the greatest war ever fought on American soil. By uncovering all parts of the Civil War, we are able as a nation to understand better who we are and where we came from.

### Background of the Civil War

The causes of the Civil War have been the source of contention and argument of historians and the American public, ever since the last surrender treaty was signed by the Confederate Army. The nuances of the argument could be explained better in a whole other paper and have been thoroughly argued enough that most historians agree that the main cause behind the split of the United States of America from 1861-1865, was the issue of slavery. But this is not slavery in the traditional sense that sees the North as fighting simply to fight to free the slaves; the Civil War has much more complicated origins than that.

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<sup>13</sup> Caitlin Wright, "The Truth of Historic Novels" (HIST 324 essay #1, Cal Poly, 2010), 3.

The environment in the South favored larger plantations while the environment in the North favored small farms, industry and the beginnings of mechanization. Slavery was the biggest economic tool in the South but barely utilized in the North, which led to fights over what should be done regarding it. Once the morality of slavery had been questioned, more people started to become concerned with the status of the institution of slavery. States' rights became important as the federal government tried to say one way or another how the topic of slavery should be handled. When Abraham Lincoln, a man who was personally opposed to slavery, was elected in 1860, the South saw it as a direct threat to their way of life and rebelled against his election by seceding from the United States. Thus slavery was the underlying root of the problems that caused the Civil War.<sup>14</sup>

In 1863, the middle of the war, Lincoln said the sole cause of the Civil War was slavery and his Confederate counterparts like Jefferson Davis and Alexander Stevens agreed. They all saw slavery as the origin of all the problems the North and South had with each other which eventually led to the split in the Union. The latter two men later decided when the war had been lost that it was not honorable for white southern men to have died to free black men so they purged slavery from the list of reasons and said it was really all about states' rights. Davis claimed they seceded because they disagreed with the government of the United States and since because their states had entered the Union willingly, they could leave it whenever they wanted.

This idea of states' rights as the cause for the Civil War lasted as the predominant idea for over 50 years. Charles Beard, a historian from the turn of the century, established the "Lost Cause" theory which southerners embraced because it tended to emphasize the South's proud past including the benefits of slavery, and put all the blame on the Yankees. The novel and

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Detweiler, "The Roots of the Civil War" (Lecture, Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, CA, February 2, 2011).

movie Gone with the Wind are examples of this theory.<sup>15</sup> In the end, while these ideas are comforting to the South because they make the South look less weak, it is not the truth because without the basis of slavery as the main split between the North and South, there would not have been a Civil War.

The soldiers who fought in this war had mixed opinions on whether slavery was a viable form of labor but what they did fight for despite their opinion on slavery varied from duty and honor to one's country or state, proving their manhood, or community and peer pressure. The idea of duty and honor to one's country or state was a huge factor in young men signing up to fight. When men in the South learned their state had seceded and now that right to secession was being threatened, they felt obligated to support their home states. Men had also grown up with stories of fantastic battles and how heroic and manly it was to fight. For some men, just the idea of gaining manhood through noble battles provoked them to fight. Finally, many who were not convinced of their own beliefs were pressured into going to war by the beliefs of others around them; their families, friends and larger community. These groups of pressure expected any able men to do what was right, and fight for the safety of the whole town. We find clues to their motivations for fighting not in memoirs of soldiers, published letters to the editors of hometown newspapers, wartime journals and diaries or regimental histories, but as McPherson points out, in personal letters of the soldiers. The previous examples have certainly been edited and crafted to put forth a certain view, whereas the letters are what the soldiers were really thinking at the time.<sup>16</sup> What is important for this paper is not perhaps the initial motivation to join the war, but the reasons why men chose to stay in the war, or to leave.

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<sup>15</sup> Detweiler, "Roots".

<sup>16</sup> McPherson, 11.

Men deserted from both armies for a variety of reasons, but from the letters McPherson and others have determined a few major causes. Harkening back to the slavery issue, it becomes clear that men fighting in the Union army did not always approve of fighting to end slavery, contrary to popular belief. Levi Ross, a Union soldier from the 86<sup>th</sup> Illinois on February 3, 1863 is quoted as saying, “Only 8 men in Co. K approve the policy and proclamation of Mr. Lincoln. Many are deserting.”<sup>17</sup> This quote shows the lack of support held by many men for the abolition of slavery, even on the Northern side. There is further proof of this lack of support of government policies in the quote, “All but 35 men of the 128<sup>th</sup> Illinois did desert over emancipation”<sup>18</sup>. This statement was made to prove the point that even in the Union there were men who didn’t support freeing the slaves, and believed in that idea so much that they were willing to desert.

It is also evident that desertion rates were higher among married men, especially when soldiers’ families were threatened with danger and hunger.<sup>19</sup> Men on both sides, but especially in the Confederate army, experienced times of war weariness and economic breakdown. This combined with being cold, hungry, barefoot and diseased also led to many men not returning to the front lines once an opportunity to leave presented itself.<sup>20</sup> In addition to the poor conditions in the camps, whenever there was low morale, or it seemed like the war would never end, or they would never win, soldiers became discouraged and they would leave.<sup>21</sup> Finally, “desertion rates [were] higher in the later part of the war. Many of the conscripts, substitutes, and bounty men who made up an increasing proportion of both armies were motivated marginally if at all by

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<sup>17</sup> Edward L. Ayers, ed. *A House Divided: A Century Of Great Civil War Quotations* (New York: J. Wiley, 1997), 180.

<sup>18</sup> Geoffrey C. Ward, *The Civil War: An Illustrated History* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 187.

<sup>19</sup> McPherson, 138.

<sup>20</sup> Ward, 256.

<sup>21</sup> McPherson, 156,162.

duty, honor, or ideology.”<sup>22</sup> These men who deserted would not have always found common ground with each other. Their reasons for disloyalty with their chosen government differed, but they did all have in common the fact that they left, most with no intention of ever returning.

While most men who deserted kept that embarrassing fact to themselves and their families hushed it down, there are historical records of a few individual deserters in the Civil War. Of the ones that we actually have record of, who were recovered and convicted of desertion, most were destined either for death or severe penalties. The opening stories of the paper are a great example of this, where both the North and the South’s punishment for desertion was simply execution. Philip Van Buskirk’s case is one example of a deserter where that was not the case.<sup>23</sup> Philip was an interesting man, because he had actually been in the United States Army and deserted and rejoined before the Civil War even happened. He was a compulsive journalist and wrote throughout the war. Unfortunately, half way through the war his journals were confiscated because they were suspected to be treasonous, so his life from July 1861- April 1863 is lost to us except where Van Buskirk tried to remember the important events at the beginning of the new journal for April 1863-December 1865. He was motivated to join the Confederate army because he felt ties to Virginia where he was born. He proclaimed in his diary, “I will not refuse if called upon, to join the side espoused by Virginia. My hope and prayer is that the Union may be preserved! That Virginia may be on the side of union.”<sup>24</sup> His motivations seem to be supporting his state over his country. This choice is not a surprise because after all, he had deserted from the United States Army previously so it does not appear he had a strong tie with the Union.

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<sup>22</sup> McPherson, 168.

<sup>23</sup> Philip Van Buskirk, *Rebel At Large: The Diary of Confederate Deserter Philip Van Buskirk*, edited by B. R. Burg (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2009).

<sup>24</sup> Van Buskirk, 34.

Van Buskirk's reason for desertion seems to be not the harsh winters that he chronicles or the poor conditions in the camps, or even the fighting itself which he records as a way to show his courage and thus obtain a certain level of manhood.<sup>25</sup> The editor of his diary cites another more personal reason altogether and that is Van Buskirk's failure to be promoted in a timely fashion.<sup>26</sup> He had seen this same treatment in the United States Army previously and found that he did not want to waste his time fighting for someone who didn't see his value and worth as a soldier. This is not explicit in his diary but he does mention only after elections for officers have been made, that he had decided to make an "'escape' from his regiment."<sup>27</sup>

#### What is desertion and why is it important to study?

Before this paper continues any further it is important to discuss the technical term of desertion because above it has been applied loosely to several different ideas, all which appear to be the same. Deserters as defined during the Civil War were any "men who were absent, some without permission, and some under leaves of absence ordered by officers without legal power to grant them."<sup>28</sup> This definition implies that any men not present at roll call each morning were automatically considered deserters. Desertion as defined in this paper will vary slightly because it is unreasonable to assume that everyman who was not at roll call had actually left the front lines. Therefore, the definition for this paper will be taken from the more modern interpretation of desertion, "the abandonment of one's 'duty' or post without permission from one's Government or one's superior."<sup>29</sup> These definitions might feel the same, but the difference lies in the moral dimension of desertion. The Civil War records reveal any man who was not present at roll call to be a deserter, when in reality, that man could have been still asleep, injured on the

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<sup>25</sup> Van Buskirk, 54.

<sup>26</sup> Van Buskirk, 35.

<sup>27</sup> Van Buskirk, 35.

<sup>28</sup> Lonn, 25.

<sup>29</sup> "Desertion," AskDefine Online Dictionary, <http://desertion.askdefine.com/> (accessed 2/10/2012).

battlefield, too sick to get up and other countless other reasons for a man not to be present besides leaving for good. The abandonment part is key to understanding the difference between the two definitions because it shows the soldier's intentions to leave of his own free will and his plan to never return. The definition used by the record keepers during the Civil War only take into account the physical presence or absence of a man, rather than his intentions and moral obligations.

As mentioned earlier in the paper, the statistics of deserters are not exactly accurately recorded, but it would be reasonable to assume that at least 10% of both armies deserted throughout the 4 years of warfare. This lack of attendance to the front lines had incredible impact on the outcome of the war. Weitz claims "[desertion] was growing worse in the Confederate ranks so that by 1865 that army was visibly melting away; the condition seemed to be improving in the Northern armies where the authorities were beginning to get a grip on the evil."<sup>30</sup> A Confederate soldier named James Bracy understood this idea when he claimed in 1863, with some validity of truth in his hyperbole, "It takes one half of the men to keep the other half from running away."<sup>31</sup> With men thus occupied chasing down their fellow soldiers, it is easy to see how the full strength of the army in man power could be so diminished from its potential.

Because desertion was a huge factor in the outcome of the war, and also because peer and community pressure played a large role in encouraging men to fight in the war in the first place, desertion was a taboo subject, and was rarely mentioned. Lonn, even 60 years after the Civil War had finished, notes in the introduction in her book, "Undoubtedly, the few remaining survivors of the struggle, Northern as well as Southern, will be repelled by the very subject of this book; probably the average reader will question the worth-whileness of an exhaustive study of that

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<sup>30</sup> Mark A. Weitz, *More Damning Than Slaughter: Desertion in the Confederate Army* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2005).

<sup>31</sup> Ayers, 50.

which seems to record a nation's shame."<sup>32</sup> The very fact that she had to mention the merit of her examining the subject of desertion, and the fact that she was the first one to do an extensive study on the subject suggests that Americans were very against the idea of desertion and wanted to sweep the whole problem under the rug and to hide it from future generations. They intended the Civil War to be remembered as a glorious battle fought by courageous men, both Northern and Southern, who endured all kinds of hardships to fight for the freedom they thought Americans should get. John Paris, a chaplain for the Confederate army said in a sermon at the occasion of the hanging of 22 Confederate deserters in February 1864, "There are few crimes in the sight of either God or man, that are more wicked and detestable than desertion."<sup>33</sup> His view is reminiscent of other Confederate and Union citizens who tended to view deserters as cowards and represents what the majority of the American public believed until at least Lonn's groundbreaking book was published.<sup>34</sup>

Even between soldiers there was a taboo of desertion, but for them it was for the opposite reason. They alone had lived the hard life and usually found no shame in others not wanting to participate in the bloody war any longer. Luther Rice Mills, a Confederate soldier mentioned in the summer of 1864 while under siege in Petersburg, "The men seem to think desertion is no crime and hence never shoot a deserter when he goes over – they always shoot but never hit."<sup>35</sup> These men were tired of fighting, and when one of their fellows decided they couldn't take it anymore, the soldiers who stayed felt empathy for them and refused to punish them as the law prescribed them to. These men still refused to talk about it as a dire problem, but they do show the initial sympathy required to understanding deserters and their motivations.

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<sup>32</sup> Lonn, v.

<sup>33</sup> Ayers, 50.

<sup>34</sup> Vinovskis, 72.

<sup>35</sup> Ayers, 51.

### What happened to deserters during the Civil War?

Once a man had decided to desert, he needed to decide where he would go. Most men returned home to help their families with the harvest or in some other capacity. Vinovskis notes, “during the winter of 1863 infrequent paydays cause[d] Confederate John E. Lowery to desert and return home, where he did odd jobs – chopping wood and working at a limekiln – to support his family, until he was arrested and returned to his company.”<sup>36</sup>

For the men that were not welcome in their hometowns because the bias against deserters was too high, they had two options, to either try to forge a new life in another town or to band together and hide in unpopulated areas. Confederate soldiers were especially prone to doing the latter because Union supporters in the mountainous regions would sometimes provide them with supplies, like food and clothing.<sup>37</sup> Philip Van Buskirk experienced something similar as he spent much of the second half of the war moving from town to town doing odd jobs like splitting wood, teaching your children, and harvesting food. He also served to protect these communities lacking men, with his presence and gun.

A not uncommon form of desertion was practiced by men called bounty jumpers. These men would enlist in a town, receive their due enlistment bonus, and consequently desert from that division and reenlist somewhere else, once again receiving the enlistment money.<sup>38</sup> This form of desertion was more common in the North because the enlistment money was much higher there.

For Van Buskirk, desertion was easy. He simply wandered around for a few weeks and was soon captured by Union forces. He was accused of being a spy because he had his pocket

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<sup>36</sup> Vinovskis, 87.

<sup>37</sup> Ward, 201.

<sup>38</sup> David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, eds, *Encyclopedia of the American Civil War: A Political, Social and Military History* (Santa Barbara, California, 2000), svv. “desertion.”

journal on him and refused to swear an oath of allegiance to the Union.<sup>39</sup> He spent 6 months in a comfortable Union jail and was mainly concerned with getting his diary back because it was confiscated when he was arrested. He seemed not to worry about the conditions of where he was living we can conclude he was being treated well. On April 26, 1862, a prisoner exchange including Van Buskirk occurred. After being released in Vicksburg, Van Buskirk began his wanderings that continued until the war was over. He escaped various encounters with travelling soldiers and was usually invited into communities for a while to take part in odd jobs that the men of the town would have done but they were off fighting in the war. He was run out of town a few times for being lazy, but always found another town that was desperate enough to take him in.

There are recorded cases of deserters from the Confederate army who were captured by the Union army and instead of becoming prisoners of war, they swore an oath of loyalty and agreed to fight for the Union, to gain their freedom. These men were called Galvanized Yankees and there were over 6,000 prisoners who participated in this program once it was created. These newly made Union soldiers could not be relied on to fight against the men they had just been fighting with so they were sent off to the West to fight the Native Americans. It could have been dangerous to the security of the Union to have former Confederates being trusted to not turn on the Union and suddenly fight for the Confederacy again. To encourage Confederate desertion into the North, the Union provided transportation into Union-occupied areas and paid fair market value for any equipment the soldiers owned.<sup>40</sup> These techniques not only weakened the manpower available to the Confederate Army, but also strengthened the Union Army at the same time.

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<sup>39</sup> Van Buskirk, 36.

<sup>40</sup> Heidler and Heidler.

The stakes for deserters who were found in their own territories were high. In the North where there were a greater number of eligible men to fight, there was a punishment of flogging for deserting, but more often the penalty was death. This is because men were more plentiful and therefore not as valued as they were in the South so if one man needed to be executed to encourage the rest not to, the commanding officers were more willing to accept that punishment. In their eyes a small number of executed soldiers could be sacrificed to prove to the rest of the soldiers that desertion was not a good option. Lincoln, however, is quoted as being against the commonly used death penalty as a way to convince other men not to desert. He stated in 1863, “General, there are already too many weeping widows in the United States. For God’s sake, don’t ask me to add to the number, for I won’t do it.”<sup>41</sup>

In the South even though there were less available men to fight, there were still severe consequences for deserting. Besides the death penalty, the South got more creative with their tortures by routinely using barrel-jackets, gagging, bucking, and flogging to encourage men not to desert.<sup>42</sup> However, it is evident that “desertion was not severely punished in the Army of Northern Virginia for most of the war’s duration. Lee, in fact, referred to his former soldiers who served with Imboden [a cavalry general] as ‘absentees’ rather than deserters.”<sup>43</sup> Lee and some other generals knew how hard it was to serve in the armies with few supplies while family members begged the men to come home and defend the farm and so were more lenient with deserters.

Most men in the South who deserted had to constantly be on the lookout for what was called the Confederate Home Guard, which was originally set up as a kind of minutemen militia, the last defense to an area but later in the war took up much of the slack on hunting down

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<sup>41</sup> Ayers, 51.

<sup>42</sup> Lonn, 226.

<sup>43</sup> Van Buskirk, 151.

deserters. The Home Guard was under the direction of the Confederate Army and thus the men enlisted in it, were exempt from serving in the Confederate Army proper.<sup>44</sup>

Desertion had a devastating impact on the outcome of the Civil War. Because of this, it is critical to look at the literary portrayals of novel focused on the idea of desertion, to better understand how the American Public view deserters, and how those views have changed over the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### Literary portrayals of desertion (1902-1998)

The novels to be described and analyzed in this next section were chosen not only because desertion is an important theme throughout them, but also because they nicely show the transition from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, of how desertion was viewed. The characters that desert tend to become more sympathetic and more relatable to the reader as time passes.

#### *The Flag on the Hilltop*

The novel *The Flag on the Hilltop*, published in 1902, by Mary Tracy Earle, follows a young man, Alec Ford, who is raised in Tennessee and when his father dies in 1863, is sent to live with his uncle, Doc Ford, a Unionist in Southern Illinois.<sup>45</sup> Southern Illinois is very close to the border between the North and the South and so many citizens are Southern sympathizers. Alec encounters an organization called the Golden Circle which is a secret secessionist civilian group, created to do anything within its means to cause the Union to fail from the inside. The whole novel is Alec's struggle to choose between supporting what he grew up believing in, or supporting his uncle. This struggle is highlighted throughout the novel by Alec's choice to either support the presence of deserters from the Union army in the area, or not.

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<sup>44</sup> Lonn, 243.

<sup>45</sup> Mary Tracy Earle, *The Flag on the Hilltop* (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1902).

Doc Ford is adamant that every deserter found must be returned to the army, while the Golden Circle's main support to the secessionist movement is to encourage Union soldiers to desert. The group provides food and shelter to anyone who is against the Union cause. At the beginning of the novel T.D., who works for Doc Ford, discovers his brother Lafayette lying sick in the forest which leads T.D. to believe Lafayette has deserted from the army.<sup>46</sup> T.D. makes Alec help hide Lafayette from Doc Ford so he doesn't get sent back to the front lines. This action against the Union automatically puts Alec at risk for not supporting his only kin left.

Once Alec is found to be assisting a deserter by the Golden Circle through an accident of overhearing a secret meeting in a cave one night while trying to help Lafayette, he is kidnapped and brought to stay in a Southern sympathizer's house.<sup>47</sup> Alec manages to escape and find his way back to Doc Ford's house because Doc Ford had hoisted an American flag above his house on the hill, a direct sign of his support for the United States government, and against the Southern sympathizers living in the area.<sup>48</sup>

Alec arrives in time to find his Uncle surrounded by men who are part of the Golden Circle and they are determined to kill him because he is a Yankee and not allowing Union deserters to sneak through the area. There is an uneasy standoff, but finally two men from the Golden Circle break rank to protect the doctor because he is a much needed and loved member of the community, regardless of his politics.<sup>49</sup> In the end, the community chooses to stand by their doctor and what is best for their well-being, rather than making their political views the most important thing. Once this important decision has been made, it becomes evident to the

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<sup>46</sup> Earle, 15.

<sup>47</sup> Earle, 45.

<sup>48</sup> Earle, 70.

<sup>49</sup> Earle, 109.

southern sympathizers that “Ford is stronger than [them], and the Golden Circle’s dead around North Pass.”<sup>50</sup>

This novel represents a fairly accurate portrayal of what it was like to live in a border state where many residents had differing views on the war, and were constantly feuding with each other. It also shows the different receptions that communities had to deserters. The members of North Pass welcomed deserters from the army they opposed, the Union Army. As mentioned previously, both armies encouraged desertion as a way to deplete the other’s army by providing incentives to deserting men. To explain North Pass’s dislike of the Union Army further, it should be understood that Illinois had also always had slavery, and especially in the southern half, felt more connected to the economy of the South, than to the industry of the North.<sup>51</sup> This connection has been discussed earlier in the paper when it was noted that many men in the Union deserted because they disagreed with Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, a statement which came from an Illinois regiment.<sup>52</sup> The environment that Alec would have found himself in the real Southern Illinois is therefore very similar to the fictional one.

The deserters in the novel are not really shown as fully developed human characters. They are the backdrop to the story, and in reality they create the tension in the community and cause the events to unfold, but none are ever actually seen or spoken to. This seems to show an acknowledgement of the fact that desertion clearly did happen in the Civil War, but since the war ended less than 50 years previous to the publication, the author and reader does not want to focus solely on it. Desertion is still seen as cowardly, something that other men did, but not the ones you know or can relate to. Also, Earle makes the one supposed deserter in the novel that you do

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<sup>50</sup> Earle, 121.

<sup>51</sup> Suzanne Cooper Guasco, “The Deadly Influence of Negro Capitalists: Southern Yeomen and resistance to the Expansion of Slavery in Illinois,” *Civil War History* 47.1 (March 2001): 7.

<sup>52</sup> Ayers, 180.

meet, Lafayette, to be a man who got drummed out of the army, not a deserter. All the characters in the novel react to this truth as being less dishonorable than deserting which shows the public opinion of desertion at the time.

### *Shiloh*

*Shiloh* was published by Shelby Foote in 1952 and recounts the 1862 battle in seven chapters from seven separate perspectives. The combination of the seven stories is intended to tell the whole story of the battle, and in the fourth one we find a story directly related to desertion. Private Otto Flickner is a Cannoneer in the 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota Battery, and he fights bravely for his country at first, but after four hours of fighting and knocking down row after row of Confederate soldiers, and constantly retreating, Flickner becomes as he says, “demoralized” and just leaves his position to retreat to the rear of the army where he finds 10,000 other men hiding from their duties too.<sup>53</sup> This was Flickner’s company’s first encounter with the enemy and once they start to experience heavy artillery fire from the Confederates, his fellow soldiers start to become afraid for their lives in a way they had not previously experienced. They retreat back twice to a farther position and by the third time, he notes that it is getting harder and harder to roll the gun back into position. He notices that all the missing men are not leaving because they are being wounded, but because they have had just enough with the fighting; they are done.<sup>54</sup>

Between the characters there is an interesting conversation about whether the men hiding behind the bluff are just demoralized or cowards for deserting their posts. Foote emphasizes through the voice of the commanding officer of Flickner that men who deserted during battle were not actual deserters, or even cowards, they had simply lost hope in winning and gave up. Flickner mentions as he is walking towards the rear that the men also walking back “were not

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<sup>53</sup> Foote, 99.

<sup>54</sup> Foote, 111.

only trying to get away from the fighting, they were trying to walk right out of the human race.”<sup>55</sup> This idea is believable up to a point. These men have seen the damage done by human violence and want nothing to do with it.

Flickner in the end acknowledges he was “just plain scared”.<sup>56</sup> He knows that if he doesn’t try to tackle his fear now he will be a coward forever and never able to forgive himself for his cowardly actions. He decides to conquer his fear and return to his unit, and when he finally stumbles upon it his sergeant asks him where he was the whole time. He admits that he just got scared and ran away. The sergeant simply tells him to go to sleep because they have lots of work to do in the morning.<sup>57</sup> This reaction to Flickner’s blatant desertion speaks volumes about the tolerance had by commanding officers to self-returning men and to the need for men in general. If a man left but came back on his own terms, acknowledging their mistakes, the apology is accepted because the well-trained men are needed on the front lines.

In *Shiloh*, Foote attempts to bring up the subject of desertion as a prevalent matter in the battles and times of the Civil War. He shows thousands of men at the rear who just refuse to fight anymore, some of whom are continuing farther in retreat than just the rear. These men are seen by the soldiers still fighting and even themselves as cowards. Flickner believes that he is a coward and a worthless soldier. He is only redeemed when he chooses to return to his unit and to the battle lines. This portrayal of desertion leads the reader to think negatively of deserters because there was always the choice to come back to the front lines and fight as they are told.

While Flickner’s desertion does not fall under the usual category of deserter as described in the definition above, it does ring true to the idea of being morally against the war when he mentions that some men were trying to walk away from the whole human race. Also, he does in

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<sup>55</sup> Foote, 114.

<sup>56</sup> Foote, 120.

<sup>57</sup> Foote, 122.

fact leave his post as his sergeant is yelling at him to return, so leaving without permission is also valid in the definition. It is only our own perception of desertion, which usually ends with the deserter far away from the war, that makes Flickner's desertion a unique case. Because he doesn't travel far in his desertion phase he is able to return with little consequences. The reader is left to infer that men who didn't return, who continued walking past that initial group of deserters are indeed cowards and have lost any sort of pride they once could have held.

Historically, Flickner's story at Shiloh is consistent with the history. The 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota Battery was there, and they were actually in one of the fiercest parts of the battle, called the Hornet's Nest. This is where a large amount of Confederate force was concentrated in the effort to break up the Union lines. Eyewitness accounts verify the large number of men hiding from duty, who "had the Tennessee River not formed such an effectual barrier to their retreat many of them would never have stopped until they reached their Northern homes."<sup>58</sup> This accuracy of what occurs in the book puts extreme faith in the author as he captured not only what happened, but what a person might have felt in that position.

As compared with the deserters in *The Flag on the Hilltop*, the deserters in *Shiloh* have a face, some of them acknowledge their fear, but the opinion the reader has of them is still harsh. In *Shiloh*, the reader assumes that every man had the choice and opportunity to go back after the fighting was over, just as Flickner did, however, we as readers know that not every one of the 10,000 men returns to his unit after the battle. The reader and Americans at the time assume they are less brave, and less willing to fight for the cause. *The Flag on the Hilltop's* deserters are also these men. We judge them through the perspective of the idea that one could always regain control and go back and face their fear. It also implies that the fear was the only reason men left.

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<sup>58</sup> Henry S. Hurter, "Narrative of the First Battery of Light Artillery," *This Week in the Civil War*, <http://thisweekinthecivilwar.com/?p=863> (accessed 3/1/2012).

As discussed earlier, there were numerous reasons that men would desert, and simplifying their reasons down to just being scared seems to dehumanize these soldiers to the point where we are angry they left the battle at all. They should have had more courage. As readers we want Flickner to return and face his fears. If a soldier does not return, he has become the opposite of this brave man, he becomes a coward, someone we don't want to associate with, or value at all. The difference between the two books can be accounted for by the fifty year gap between their publications. *Shiloh* was published after both world wars and during the Korean War. For Earle, the Civil War was still present in everyday life but by the time Foote wrote his book, almost one hundred years had passed since the beginning of the Civil War.

### *A Dream of Kings*

*A Dream of Kings* by Davis Grubb was published in 1955 and is a story about one young man's journey from childhood to manhood and maturity. The boy, Tom Christopher, comes of age during the Civil War as he fights for and then deserts from the Confederate army to return to the one girl he has ever loved. The novel is spent describing his childhood and his return home from the army, not his desertion, but the desertion is the turning point in his life and thus one of his most important moments. He is tired of the war, and just wants to get away from it all, for him the political motivations for winning or losing the war simply do not matter.<sup>59</sup>

Tom Christopher's love interest is a girl named Cathie, who comes to live with him and his Aunt Sarah when he is a boy after her mother dies and her father abandons her to fight in the Mexican-American war and then to support the Confederate side of the Civil War. Tom experiences mixed feelings towards Cathie as they grow up together and after their first sexual encounter, he runs away thinking he killed Cathie. This period of confusion is spent wandering the countryside and running as far away from his home as possible. Finally, exhausted, he finds

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<sup>59</sup> Davis Grubb, *A Dream of Kings* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955).

himself being taken in by a couple named Isaac and Nancy who have three children. They ask no questions as to why he ran away and he proves much needed labor to the family farm.

As the apparent tensions between Unionists and Secessionists grow, it becomes clear that Isaac will leave to fight in the war, and Tom is expected to go with him. Tom has no idea which side is which or which side he'll be fighting on, as evident from his answer to a Rebel's question "which side are ye on" a few days prior to their departure, "I don't rightly know... Which sides are they?"<sup>60</sup> He only survives the encounter by knowing that Isaac dislikes Lincoln, thus solidifying that Isaac and Tom will fight on the side of the Confederates. One morning he is awoken by Isaac and knows it is time to go enlist. In the camps, Isaac is chosen to fight in Stuart's cavalry and Tom is left to fight in the Fourth Virginia under Colonel Jackson. A few years pass and Tom learns of Isaac's death, but he "cannot remember grief at the death of Isaac."<sup>61</sup> His decision to desert comes after news of Jackson's death spreads to the troops. Tom had developed a devotion to Jackson not unlike a father or god, and once that protection is gone, all hope is lost and Tom no longer feels any connection to the war and begins his journey home.

Tom's desertion begins with an infected leg caused a few days previous from the battle. Tom rides until he cannot any longer and when he finally hops off his horse next to a riverbank, the weight on his leg causes the pain to greatly increase and he passes out. He wakes up in an obviously pro-union and abolitionist home because they have a sampler framed on the wall, "PITY THE SLAVE."<sup>62</sup> It turns out to be a house of all blind women, who assume he is a Union soldier so they nursed him back to health, but when a man courting one of the young women to see her, returns and sees Tom's uniform he knows immediately that Tom is a traitor and Tom must make a quick escape. In the struggle to leave the house, the young Union soldier corners

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<sup>60</sup> Grubb, 195.

<sup>61</sup> Grubb, 218.

<sup>62</sup> Grubb, 231.

Tom and he is forced to kill the Union soldier in order to escape. After this he makes the bold claim that if he did not believe that somewhere beyond there was solace and an answer to the madness of war, he would have hanged himself, “like Judas amid the cursed blossoms of his springtime tree.”<sup>63</sup> Tom sees Cathie and the return to his farm as the answer to the madness of war. Family in his mind is greater than any violence.

He continues to travel west towards his home and tries to avoid other travelers on the road because they ask too many questions which would result in him being, “dragged off to the handiest village jail to await tribunal justice” which would ultimately end in his death.<sup>64</sup> He sees plenty of ragged men wandering the roads, missing parts of their bodies, minds or both. To provide sustenance for himself, he occasionally rides past a mountain cabin and begs a meal. The first place he visits is the home of Nancy and he is heart-broken to see that nothing remains in the cabin, which she has left to be with another man since the death of her husband Isaac. With this incident he believes that Cathie too will have forgotten about him and moved on with her life so he rides away from the cabin in search of her. With this despair he drinks and continues to ride until he ends up drunk at a steamboat where prostitutes work. He pays all he has to sleep with one of the girls, but in the end, all he does is cry. Finally, he sobers up and rides until he returns to his childhood home.

He finds himself standing, looking over the ghosts of his past and thinks, “Nothing had changed on that hillside; my feet found their way to the sheep paths of my childhood wanderings... I had the sudden, childish notion that they were all there...all of them waiting for me with tears and cries of welcome.”<sup>65</sup> In the end, everyone does welcome him back. Tom’s Aunt Sarah assumes it will be like old times and he will continue to be a child in her house, but

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<sup>63</sup> Grubb, 244.

<sup>64</sup> Grubb, 244.

<sup>65</sup> Grubb, 267.

that is not the case. Cathie and Tom resume their romance. The war seems so far away and irrelevant at the end of the story, the reader wonders if it ever mattered that Tom left and fought in the greatest battle ever fought on American soil.

The portrayal of a young boy fighting in a war he doesn't understand or care about the outcome of, or even what the sides are was fairly common. Going back to the section earlier about motivations of soldiers, the pressures of family and friends were huge motivators for men with no personal motivations. The author indicates Tom Christopher is only motivated to fight by Isaac, and then he is encouraged by the large personality of Jackson, but when both men have died he sees no point in continuing to fight so his loyalty to any side is gone and he begins his journey home. Tom's experience on the road to home where he is fairly paranoid of running into towns people is accurate because the Home Guard were usually harsh with their punishments. There are reports from North Carolina area which Tom said he was supposed to be from, that the Home Guard were especially vicious. They would tear up fence posts to roast their morning coffee, just because they could.<sup>66</sup> There were also incidents where innocent men were killed.<sup>67</sup> Finally, Tom's welcome reception at his home is telling of his family's impartiality to the war, and relief to have a man around to protect themselves from the wandering soldiers who ransack civilian homes for fun.

*A Dream of Kings* progresses and separates from the last two books on the notion of desertion. In the past two, the deserters have been Northerners, and both have been a kind of idealized form of desertion. In *The Flag on the Hilltop*, the deserters are never seen in person and from that we assume as readers they are bad people who need to be hidden away and not talked about, while in *Shiloh*, there is a harsh perception of deserters being cowards who did not have

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<sup>66</sup> Thomas G. Burton, "Traditional Views of the Home Guard," *Tennessee Folklore Society bulletin* 46, no.4 (1980), 128.

<sup>67</sup> Burton, 127.

the courage to get up and fight like men. For Flickner, his personal motivations to fight the war win out over his personal reasons to stop fighting. But in *A Dream of Kings*, Tom is the complete opposite of those men. We get his background story and we feel connected to him as a reader so we are rooting for him to leave the army to return to his love. We want him to go home and find Cathie waiting for him. The deserter has become a more connectable character, relatable, and perhaps the most shocking, his desertion has become relatable. Enough time has passed that beginning to talk about desertion in a less negative light can be accepted.

This vision of the North Carolina deserter presented by Grubb is consistent with the statistics. North Carolina men were more likely than men from any other state to desert from the Army.<sup>68</sup> And while the Home Guard was something to be fearful of and avoid, the communities were generally welcoming to deserters. The families wanted their men home. It was pointed out that “the war was a rich man’s war and a poor man’s fight.”<sup>69</sup> This view appropriately agrees with Tom’s ideology for fighting the war because he is a poor man fighting for a war he does not understand or support. When his motivations for fighting (Isaac and Jackson) are gone, he leaves without a second thought. Many men from North Carolina fought the same way, and once they realized they did not support the war, or care about its outcome, they left to support their suffering families at home.<sup>70</sup>

### *Cold Mountain*

*Cold Mountain* by Charles Frazier, published in 1998, is very similar to *A Dream of Kings* in that it follows the lives of two people, Ada and Inman who are separated lovers, as they live through the Civil War. They met in a small town in the Blue Ridge Mountains where Inman

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<sup>68</sup> Richard Bardolph, “Inconstant Rebels: Desertion of North Carolina Troops in the Civil War,” *North Carolina Historical Review* (1964), 168.

<sup>69</sup> Bardolph, 176.

<sup>70</sup> Bardolph, 178.

grew up and where Ada and her father move to better his health.<sup>71</sup> This novel attempts to explore the reason for war, how civilians survived on the home front, and what human nature can be like under the pressure of war, but the focus is on the topic of desertion.

The novel opens with Inman, a soldier in the Confederate Army who decides after almost being killed in the Battle at Petersburg that he will desert and return home. He has been wounded several times, but the wound he receives on his neck is so dreadful that his two nearest companions saw it and left him for dead in the field.<sup>72</sup> Somehow Inman is able to live through the terrible wound, and ends up recovering at a Confederate hospital. He knows that as soon as he is healed enough to fight again, he will be sent out to the front lines.<sup>73</sup> He also reads an article in the newspaper that any deserters would be hunted down. Their names would be given to the Home Guard and they would be patrolling for any man who was a deserter.<sup>74</sup>

While fighting, Inman is a good soldier, who remains strong through the hard times and is always there to defend his country when necessary. The fact that he survived all the way until the siege at Petersburg, which started in late 1864, near the end of the war, indicates that he is smart, capable and has seen the gruesome nature of war, but stuck with it anyways. So it is surprising when Inman suddenly decides that he is going to leave and go home. The reader understands through a montage of Inman's war experiences that he can no longer handle the brutality and violence of the war. He can no longer justify killing men over and over.

Inman experiences different interactions with people as he travels home. He notes right away, "the dogs and the threat of Home Guard out prowling and the gloom of the cloudy nights

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<sup>71</sup> Charles Frazier, *Cold Mountain* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

<sup>72</sup> Frazier, 7.

<sup>73</sup> Frazier, 16.

<sup>74</sup> Frazier, 18.

made for nervous wayfaring.”<sup>75</sup> There are various encounters where Inman’s life is on the line because of dangerous people, but also times where he is provided with safety and protected for a short time by generous people. In general, the good encounters, in which he found people sympathetic to his desire to return home, were women whose husbands and brothers, were off at the war. These characters are lacking the security and comfort of having a man around so they are more willing to risk their lives to provide Inman with a place to stay and food, for a few days in return for doing chores around the farm. The characters who participate in the bad encounters are usually the men who stayed behind, particularly, the Home Guard. The Home Guard plays a significant role in *Cold Mountain*, Inman is constantly hiding from them and avoiding various men who are out to get deserters and either return them to their units or put them up to the justice they believe is fair, death.

After almost six months of traveling, backtracking and frightening encounters, Inman and Ada find themselves together again and all is right in the world for a few days. Inman is later accidentally killed in a shoot-out between the local Home Guard and the people Inman and Ada are with which further shows the violence the Home Guard used to keep order while the war was going on.

*Cold Mountain* was the first true attempt by a novelist to describe the conditions and fate of deserters. Therefore, it is fascinating that it is only now that the reader truly identifies with the deserter, feels sympathy and honestly is rooting for Inman to return home safely. The deserter has finally become the sympathetic character that it deserved to be almost 150 years ago. Coming this far was obviously not easy. As seen in *Dream of Kings* where there is partial sympathy for Tom, deserters can grab the attention and heart-strings of readers, but it was not until Inman was introduced into mainstream culture that desertion became a topic that people

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<sup>75</sup> Frazier, 71.

discussed willingly. In the end it shows that for many men who deserted, the war became not about federal power versus state power, but about what was most important for each man as he fought for the right for his voice to be heard.

*Cold Mountain* has won many awards for its story, including the National Book Award, and was even made into a major motion picture with A-list actors and actresses in it. This proves the idea that *Cold Mountain* created an environment in which desertion was maybe not such a bad thing, that desertion could have been justified, and finally, that desertion perhaps was much more prevalent throughout the Civil War than we Americans would like to perhaps believe.

Historians have taken on the challenge of determining whether *Cold Mountain* is historically accurate or not. Frazier takes those claims head on when he states that he tried to stay true to the social, economic and cultural environment that his story supposedly took place.<sup>76</sup> The historian reviewing the book continues to claim that Frazier mislead the reader into thinking that times were worse than they really were, that he made the character Inman too sympathetic to the modern reader. Going back to Rorty's definition of truth, where it comes from yourself and your upbringing, Frazier was extremely successful at creating a book which is historically accurate. He is successful in capturing the sense that soldiers were disillusioned from war, many wanted to simply return to their homes and continue on in life. The Home Guard is a threat to this freedom in the book and in real life as they were ruthless men who unreasonably killed fellow citizens because they had the power to do so.<sup>77</sup> Finally, his addition of a lost love, an added reason for Inman to return home, is consistent with the many letters women on the home front wrote during the war, begging their men, their fathers, brothers and husbands, to return and set what was not

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<sup>76</sup>Burton, 184.

<sup>77</sup> Martin Crawford, "Review: 'Cold Mountain' Fictions: Appalachian Half-Truths," *Appalachian Journal* 30, no.2/3 (Winter-Spring 2003): 130.

right, right again.<sup>78</sup> The fact that the real Inman might not have experienced quite this dramatic of a return home is irrelevant because Frazier was able to capture something that rings true. He was able to explain to the American people once and for all why desertion was not something to be ashamed of. Honorable people could desert and it did not make them any less honorable. Through Frazier's *Cold Mountain*, Americans finally understand desertion during the Civil War was not the greatest evil or something to be ashamed of, but simply part of the American history.

### Conclusion

The records we have on rates of desertion or their punishments are not always accurate, but as seen with the opening stories, the stories we do have the most of, do not end happily for the deserter. In the novels analyzed, each deserter finds their way home, but whether they are happy or not is left to be seen.

Even Ella Lonn's perspective is interesting because she is of the same opinion that deserters choose to leave, and that desertion was wrong. While she does take the side that desertion should be discussed out in the open, her opinions and biases towards the men who did desert, have not changed at all from the public's opinions during the war.

It is interesting that in the main novels where characters that desert are prominent, the ones who are the most sympathetic characters are the ones who are from the Confederate Army. A possible reason for this occurrence is the fact that many Americans still sympathize with the South and support the Lost Cause theory. By making the deserters of the Confederate Army more sympathetic is it also giving a heart to the poor condition of these men, almost in a patronizing way. One critique of *Cold Mountain* reveals this as a possible hidden agenda of and comments that Frazier's story is "rooted in the long-held sentimental views of the mountain

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<sup>78</sup> Bardolph, 178.

region.”<sup>79</sup> So even in the more liberal and open stories about desertion there appear to be biases towards the side of the poor Confederates, who need to be supported in some way.

In the end, it turns out not to be whether one story is more true than another. Each of the novels analyzed have a basis in the factual truth, and each one has its own story truth. What is fascinating and most important to understand is how these authors throughout the last century have used their biases to skew the empathy of the reader towards or against deserters; Earle was a Northerner who grew up supporting the Union, Foote was a Southerner who grew up believing that men could chose whether they would be heroes or not, Grubb was a Southerner always trying to return to his roots, and finally Frazier is a Southerner concerned with upholding the dignity of the South. Each bias created a different truth about deserters. The truth about desertion comes down to whether these soldiers, who made up 9.6% of the Union army and almost 15% of the Confederate army, are cowards or heroes in their own way. We perhaps can put judgment on these characters from our understanding of actual deserters, mainly our example of Philip Van Buskirk.

Obviously this is a small sample size of books, so pulling so many hard conclusions from these four books can be tough, but it is important to understand that each book is not only a reflection of the author’s bias, and the time they come from, but also the view on desertion as a whole in the country. Each of these novels offers a “story truth” along with in some cases, the real truth. Sometimes the fiction comes closer to reality than reality could ever come. From these truths, Americans gain judgment on desertion, what desertion means and how it should be interpreted and as time as gone on, the focus has become more clearly on deserters being real people, everyday people, who had reasons for giving up on fighting. As time goes on the judgment starts to become, not whether simply if someone deserted or not, but whether their

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<sup>79</sup> Crawford, 185.

reasons for desertion can be justified, because just talking about desertion, just mentioning it is not enough. In order to make changes to the way we view desertion, we must start to see deserters as more than cowards; we must see them as people who simply did not choose to fight anymore. By the time *Cold Mountain* was published in 1998, I believe that balance and maturity had been achieved.

As Americans we gain important perspective on ourselves as a nation by exploring the less glamorous side of our past. Desertion certainly falls in that category. Through continued presence of the discussion of desertion in the media through popular books, and increased research we will gain an understanding of what motivated Americans then and what motivates them now. Desertion was not an isolated problem of the American Civil War; it has been and will continue to be a devastating problem for any army that plans on fighting a war. In the end, it is the men who desert, their motivations that speak the most to us, and give us cause to examine and reevaluate the way we live our lives, and what we stand for.

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