

# **The Play of History: Civil War Reenactments and Their Use of the Past**

*Rory Turner  
Indiana University*

Civil War Reenactments are reconstitutions of historical events into performance events. They retain the event structure of Civil War battles and camp life but recast those events and aestheticize them into cultural performances. Along with the various cultural valuations inscribed through a range of communicative forms—including academic historical writing—that underwrite contemporary understandings of the Civil War, the formal properties of reenactments shape how history becomes a symbolic resource to those who participate in them. Reenacting presents the past, presents history as a usable symbolic resource. This resource is put to service not only in the representation and acting-out of cultural identity with varying agendas, but also in predications of personal identity that capitalize on the complex and emotionally resonant semantic field that the Civil War, as it was and as it has been culturally redefined, evokes.

Reenactments are large-scale public display events which feature a performance of a Civil War battle. They are held throughout the United States but most often in the states where the Civil War was fought, taking for their sites the actual battlefield or, more frequently, a nearby location with similarities in terrain which has been made available. Reenactments take place over a weekend. Reenactors set up camp on Friday night and usually stage battles on both Saturday and Sunday, along with drills, demonstrations, dances, and portrayals of camp life. Although every reenactment is laid out differently, generally space is arranged into Confederate and Union camps divided by a Suttler area, where the small cottage industry of reenactment equipment suppliers sets up. These camps are arranged according to typical Civil War-period military layout and are as historically accurate as possible. Nearby is the main battlefield, with space for spectators,

who are separated from the event by temporary fences or police lines. Spectators view the battle and are also encouraged to walk around the camp and question reenactors about their hobby and about military life in the Civil War. Reenactment battles are often supplemented with narrative accounts and commentary in the form of public address announcements, brochures, or radio play-by-play.

Reenactors set up their mimetic world along the lines of Civil War military organization and period life, constructed through a massive research endeavor undertaken from the level of the individual reenactor to the semi-professional organizations that plan the major anniversary battles. The equipment and uniforms are largely determined by the individual reenactment unit, a unit based on a historic counterpart, which ranges in size from a company to a brigade, from less than a dozen to more than a hundred men. These units drill in Civil War-period battle procedures based on texts such as Hardee's *Manual of Drill*. The repertoire of basic battlefield tactics that are learned are then put to service, using Civil War-period communications and military command structures. Units act together under the ranking officer, whose orders are delivered by cavalry from the generals, who operate according to prearranged plans. These organizing modes are supplemented by pre-battle briefings of officers and men, and in some cases by distribution of maps and directions to officers, who spread the information to the men.

The reconstitution of history in reenacting is a two-step process. The Civil War as an event was massively documented in a variety of records: photographs, diaries, letters, news reports, military annals, and many other forms. It is these records that reenactors have used to reconstruct the Civil War period and to reenact it. The reconstruction of history as a form of representation has been a controversial issue over the last decade or so in historiography. Hayden White (1977) among others has pointed out that historical writing is a genre, like a literary genre, which reconstructs historical events rhetorically, reflecting the concerns of the author and his or her context. This reconstruction with an attitude is certainly evident in reenacting, but at another level, reenacting is remarkably objective. However the historical records and the reenactors construe them, the event structures, practices, and action of the time period is embedded in those records. As a mimetic form, reenacting takes that information and uses it as a recipe for action, which, with a fairly high degree of accuracy, can depict, for instance, the course of a battle or the cooking of a stew. What is being created is, in Keir Elam's terms, a "possible world" (1980:98ff), which is maintained by the iconic identity of the

stuff of the reenacting world with the Civil War-period world as recorded in historical documentation.

Two factors work against the accuracy of this mimesis for reenactors. The first is the problem of authenticity, which has a number of elements. While it is possible to reconstruct the general patterns of events and practical activity in reenacting, it is very difficult to exactly duplicate them. A battle like Gettysburg involved more than one hundred thousand soldiers. The largest reenactment ever, which was the 125th anniversary Gettysburg reenactment, had only about ten thousand. There are also problems of intensity. Reenactors do not use real bullets nor do they have to live for years in hard conditions. There are problems of anachronism, from Coca Cola in the drinking cups to helicopters over the battlefield. Finally, there are problems of subjectivity, problems which confront anyone attempting to know the Other. Even if a reenactor could get everything externally right, there would still be a level of self-consciousness present that would thwart a complete experience of the Civil War time period (Handler, 1988:245). The best reenactors can do is strive for an iconic identity between their activities and those of the time period, an identity most possible in the more routine empirical aspects of the hobby, such as cooking and clothing. When reenactors approach that identity with materials and actions that are in some ontological sense "the same" as the original, to the point where they can back up their representation with documentary evidence, they claim their portrayal is authentic. Authenticity in this sense becomes the guiding aesthetic for reenactors in the creation of their possible world (Handler 1988:243).

The second "dyssimulating" factor in reenacting is its nature as a public performance (Handler 1988:253). Not only does the presence of the public contribute to anachronistic elements, it also transforms the battle performances to make a better show. An example of this was the portrayal of civilians on the 125th anniversary First Manassas reenactment battlefield, when historically, they were several miles away (ACWCC 1986:41).

What the reenactment situation sets up is another world, a *similacrum* of another time which interpenetrates "real time" and in many cases succumbs to the necessities of effective theatric performance in that real time. The major points of contact between these worlds is in the battle performance and in the face-to-face interactions in the camps, in which the reenactors mediate between the two worlds, showing in their costumes and gear the Civil War, but communicating about it in the context of the "real" present.

The world created by reenacting is a particularly charged world. It is the world of the Civil War, a time in American history which was definitive in creating this country. However one wants to interpret it, the conflict that took place left scars that even now have not completely healed. It has been vilified and it has been romanticized and glorified. It has been reconstructed by historians with the rhetoric and attitudes that Hayden White writes of. It has also been communicated in oral tradition and still lives in the cultural identity of many reenactment participants, particularly in the South. Here is not the place to examine these reconstructions in detail. The point is that reenacting the Civil War carries with it a rich load of associations that bear on the patterning of experience that takes place in these events.

But it is not just the Civil War that is evoked in reenacting. It is the past in general, particularly the preindustrial past. This is a quality Civil War reenacting shares with other forms of Living History (Anderson 1984). Indeed, the cultural nostalgia for what was perceived as a "kinder, gentler," more wholesome time seems to be at the heart of many people's affinity for reenacting and living history. Reenactors talk of traveling back through time, of time tripping (Anderson 1984). Richard Handler has raised the possibility that this better past is largely an artifact of narrativity in historical writing, lending a romantic coherence to a world perhaps as fragmented as ours (1988:251). There is undoubtedly a romanticization taking place, and also a response to what might have been a more integrated existence, but be that as it may, this yearning for the past plays a part in the Civil War's use as a symbolic resource.

Civil War reenactments, then, are performance events in which an iconically constituted realistic historic world is presented through various modes of communication, a world which stands for a range of indexical associations, many of them highly charged with emotional significance. How do these events get used? How do they shape the experience of those that participate in them?

One use of reenacting is as a cultural performance. Milton Singer writes of a reenactment of the American Revolution as a

. . . multimedia expression of an American cultural identity, encapsulated in concrete symbolic representations of its history, cosmology, and moral values. To participate in such performances, either as organizers, actors, or audience is to exhibit to oneself and to others the concrete representations of that identity as well as to make a public declaration of one's acceptance of it (1977:442).

Participation in reenactments in this light can be seen as participation in a rite of American civil religion (Bellah 1974), a way of identifying

oneself with a larger corporate identity. The iconic realism of these events helps this rite to take place. There is nothing mystical or foreign about reenactments. They are literal-minded and safely theatrical, distanced from the spectator, yet concerning an important national event. Participants, especially spectators, can feel good about being American but in the very American mode of independent-minded level-headedness. Support for this view of the function of reenactments as a symbolic resource comes from their emergence in celebrations of anniversaries of the important periods in American history—the Bicentennial, the Civil War centennial—with their accompanying nationalistic hoopla. Also significant in this regard is the end of the 125th Gettysburg reenactment, in which all the reenactors uncovered their heads and kneeled while the American flag was paraded between the lines of troops to the accompaniment of patriotic music.

However, with Civil War reenacting, more than one cultural identity is being performed. Alongside that American flag was a Confederate flag. The Civil War was a conflict between two peoples, a conflict which has lingered on and even festered. Rather than a performance of national identity, many Southern reenactors see reenacting as a way to assert Southern identity. Union reenactors can find themselves cursed at when reenacting in Southern areas, and many Confederate reenactors explicitly state that it is in memory of the South that they reenact. During the centennial, the play world of the reenactment threatened to break down into real conflict mirroring the still existing cultural split between North and South. Jay Anderson reports, "A close friend of mine who was fighting in a Pennsylvania unit returned from the battle (the reenactment of the first Manassas) wary of participating in further reenactments. Many of the men on both sides, he said, seemed bent on refighting the war, and he was afraid that 'some drunken hothead would decide to really let fly with a minnie ball'" (1984:143). The acting out of these continuing cultural and regional conflicts continues and is dealt with in part through the framing mechanism of the diegetic accompaniments to the battle performances. The brochures and broadcasts that accompany reenacting emphasize the national and historical character of these events and shape the interpretation of reenactments away from its contentious possibilities. Using narrative and discursive language, they rationalize the purpose of these events as educational and cast the action in metaphors that recall those a football announcer might use, "hard-working," "courage in the face of adversity," "well trained," "sportsmanship," and the like. Such language integrates these events

into the American mainstream ideology. What is happening with these varying agendas of cultural identity can be seen as different readings of the Civil War, bringing out different indexical associations of the conflict. The national agenda sees the war as a rapprochement between the regions. Many Southerners still feel that it was an unfair victory and an outside imposition of centralized authority on them, violating their rights as individuals. Thus, reenacting becomes an arena for cultural contestation of identity with competing agendas. The dominant cultural bias uses framing mechanisms to defang the possibilities for disruptive interpretations, but those interpretations still exist among some reenactors and spectators.

The other function of the reenactment that I want to examine is its role as a resource in the constitution of personal identity. James Fernandez has developed ". . . a theory of figurative predication of social identity, which argues simply that the inchoateness of the human condition requires that we recurrently escape literal-mindedness and, making use of the various rhetorical devices, recurrently predicate figurative identities upon ourselves" (1986:290). Setting aside discussion of the implication this interesting theory has for an understanding of the human being, it is evident that in reenacting, this process of predication of figurative identities occurs. Reenactors take on the role of the Other, Civil War-period identities, and this does something for them. Fernandez and others (Bakhtin 1966; Turner 1969) emphasize the importance of transcending the ordinary in certain occasions as fundamental to human experience. I agree that this transcendence is in some sense essential, but I want to look at the other side of the coin, the effect of such predication of figurative, symbolic identity on the ongoing identity of the individual, in this case, a reenactor.

The mimetic iconic nature of reenacting is crucial to this process. A reenactor puts him or herself inside a figurative identity and a figurative world. In a flexible manner, a reenactor becomes a different *I*; flexible, because there is a constant slippage between this figurative identity and normal identity. This relationship of identity and difference produces an experience of altered subjectivity in combination with the space to reflect on that alteration (Babcock 1979). A process of identity and meaning-creation takes place. The individual identifies with the figurative *persona* and world of the Civil War, but interprets the meaning of this figuration in an interplay between the range of indexical associations of the figuration, and the concerns and attitudes with which he or she approaches the experience. These concerns have in turn been shaped by personal history as it has been experienced,

and this experience conditioned by the cultural modeling processes that make up socialization. Thus the predication of identity that takes place in reenactments leads to a number of possible reflexively-induced redefinitions of the war. In Peircean semiotic terms, the self (the reenactor) is made an icon of itself (the Civil War persona) with indexical associations (cultural meanings associated with the Civil War) which are then interpreted by the self, an interpretant already made up of signs derived from prior communications (Singer 1979). But it is not just the Civil War and history that is being redefined. As an active part of the semiotic process, the individual is transformed by it. The *I* becomes a Civil War soldier and sees itself differently as well. It comes to know itself better through this process of predication and reflexivity.

The semantic field of the interpreted Civil War provides a rich ground for this process of identification and self-articulation. I have already mentioned how national and regional identity are central themes in reenacting. Many reenactors already have strong feelings about these issues, and reenacting provides a ground in which those feelings can be experienced and personalized. For others, it is the aspect of stepping into a romanticized, integrated past that affects them, lending an experience of glory to what otherwise could be a drab and powerless existence (Errington 1988).

I'd like to sound a note of caution in conclusion. What I have discussed in this paper by no means exhausts the range of interpretations and experiences reenacting generates. There are other agendas at work in the more general cultural political messages reenactments make, agendas of specific sites, agendas of modernity, and even postmodernity. There are more personal meanings, and processes of creation of meaning—for instance, the effect on identity of simply being a performer—regardless of the nature of the performance. There is, along with the process of self-definition, a process of distancing between reenactor and role, when the impact of what soldiers had to go through is realized. I don't feel that these other aspects invalidate what I have discussed. They only go to show how complex public display events can be. What I have attempted here, an analysis of structural qualities of the event, and an indication of how and what that event might mean in part to some of its participants, illustrates some of the uses to which history can be put in the ongoing business of creating the present.

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