

The Devil's Topographer
Ambrose Bierce and the American War Story

By David M. Owens

(Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006. Pp. xii, 166. Illustrations, maps, appendices, bibliography, index. \$33.00.)

On April 19, 1861, eighteen-year-old Ambrose Bierce enlisted with the Indiana Volunteer Ninth Regiment at Elkhart, the second man in the county to do so. After serving briefly in the Cheat Mountain region of West Virginia, Bierce and the Ninth Regiment were transferred to Don Carlos Buell's Army of the Ohio, and shipped to Nashville. There they were absorbed into William Hazen's Brigade, where they remained for the rest of the war. Hazen's Brigade and the Ninth Regiment saw some of the fiercest action of the war, distinguishing themselves at Shiloh, Stone's River, Chickamauga, Resaca, and Kennesaw Mountain. Bierce was wounded in the head at this last engagement and received a medical discharge in January 1865.

David M. Owens's *The Devil's Topographer: Ambrose Bierce and the American War Story* confines itself largely to this itinerary, considering Bierce's life after the war only as it relates to the writing of his short fiction and memoirs of his time in service. Owens contends that Bierce was jolted into writing his vivid and ironic tales of heroism and desperation by reading *A Narrative of Military Service* (1885) by Hazen, Bierce's admired superior officer during the war. The table of contents for Hazen's *Narrative*, as Owens points out, looks like a nearly complete list of Bierce's own

settings for his stories—Shiloh, Stone's River, Readyville, Chickamauga, Resaca, Pickett's Mill. Owens further argues that Bierce's work as army topographer (his book reproduces several of Bierce's detailed maps) holds the clue to his literary achievement in such famous stories as "Chickamauga" and "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge." Bierce's "habit was to write about places as they were when he saw them, regardless of whether the events of the story are based on real incidents or purely invented" (p. 5). The topographical details of Bierce's stories, the concreteness of their geography and even time frame—"places as they were *when he saw them*"—suggest to Owens that "Bierce's war stories are primarily a reflection of his own journey through the war" (p. 19).

Such a thesis has some powerful implications for an aesthetic assessment of "the American War Story" invoked in Owens's subtitle. In his preface and again in the afterword, the author discusses war stories as relying essentially on the author's "having been there." Bierce really was there, to be sure, but Owens does not rest satisfied with the basic knowledge that Bierce fought in this battle, or even with Bierce's own published non-fictional recollections of his experiences. He wants to find which

cliff “The Horseman in the Sky” plummeted from (Seneca Rocks, West Virginia), or where the notches and bridges are that serve as symbolically laden settings for “An Affair at Coulter’s Notch” and “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge.” (Owens concludes that the notch and the bridge are fictional, but based on topographic prototypes observed by Bierce). While it is important to know how powerfully actual experience determined Bierce’s aesthetic practice, Owens finally invests too much in the concept of experience. When Owens suggests that his “personal research retracing Bierce’s steps through the war in substantially the same sequence as he took them” (p. 5) can deliver essential critical insight, he

reaches for an ideal of experience—as chronologically mappable, as capable of re-creation and communication—that Bierce’s fictions explode time and again when they describe the ironic consequences of the fact that experience is as much a function of distorted perception as it is of topography.

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By His Own Hand?

The Mysterious Death of Meriwether Lewis

Edited by John D. W. Guice, with contributions by James J. Holmberg, John D. W. Guice, and Jay H. Buckley

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In October 1809, just three years after he and William Clark made their triumphant return from their voyage of discovery, thirty-five-year-old Meriwether Lewis perished from gunshot wounds at an obscure Tennessee inn southwest of Nashville. Interest in Lewis’s death has hardly subsided in recent years; indeed, the two-hundredth anniversary of the expedition seems to have sparked a new fasci-

nation with the famous explorer’s sad ending. Fortunately, *By His Own Hand?* offers a highly readable, well-researched account of the controversy surrounding Lewis’s death that is valuable to both general readers and scholars alike.

It would have been hard to find three scholars more qualified to discuss this topic than Guice, professor of history emeritus at the University