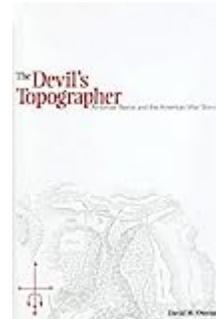




**David M. Owens.** *The Devil's Topographer: Ambrose Bierce and the American War Story.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006. xii + 166 pp. \$33.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57233-464-9.



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### **Bierce, by a Bierce-Minded Author**

Without question, Ambrose Bierce—author, former journalist, and participant in the American Civil War—has gained a wide readership and acceptance among the general public as well as among those who ask “what *exactly* constitutes American literary writing?” Due in part to Bierce’s stay in England, he is comparatively well known on the other side of the Atlantic. Bierce’s prose—often satirical, gritty, “no-nonsense,” multilayered, and metaphorical in its performative literary functions—served the important purpose of transmitting the war experience to the public consciousness of America. Here he is joined by Stephen Crane and John De Forest, on the one hand, Walt Whitman and (for better or worse) Margaret Mitchell, on the other. In what follows, I shall *summa summarum* argue that, also for better or worse, David M. Owens, in his analysis of Bierce’s writing, embarks on a mission remarkably reminiscent of Bierce’s own character.

Owens begins with definitions of the most crucial terms, the theoretical and methodological framework, and a brief biography of Bierce’s life. In the study proper, Owens divides Bierce’s war stories in three, according

to chronological and thematic order, distinguishing between early, mid and late periods of the war as backdrops to Bierce’s writing. I shall now attempt to divide the review into three: what I deemed the positive features and strengths, what I found worthy of criticism, and a brief conclusion.

On the positive side, first, the structure of the study is clear and logical, a traditional “real-life” narrative. Owens attempts to equate chronological events suggested by the stories with Bierce’s own experience which together reveal a larger path of the latter’s wanderings in the war and his suggested progress as a writer. This idea has, the author intimates (pp. 3-4), only very recently been executed. Even readers equipped with a less complete knowledge of the topic can easily follow the general outline and theses presented by Owens. Second, Owens’s argumentative and assertive prose is lively and pleasing to read, especially towards the end of the book. Third, in places though not everywhere (as discussed below), the study is well researched, depending heavily on primary-source material. Perhaps it would have been better, since this is a reconstructionist history, to divide the bibliogra-

phy between primary and secondary sources cited. Further, some of the markings (such as Roman numerals to designate sources) make it more difficult to locate the sources cited. To be sure, citation techniques vary, but a list of abbreviations would have helped provide clarity. Fourth, as a tribute to Bierce's topographical career, there are plenty of maps (twelve) and two illustrations. While they tend to clarify the author's argument, I found the more modern maps a bit vague. Still, the inclusion does deserve credit. For instance, Owens is able to demonstrate the accuracy of Bierce's drawings by comparing his topographical map from 1863 with a modern map completed with the help of satellite, aerial, and computer observations and calculations (p. 11).

On the negative side, the traditional approach and relative simplicity also has its problems. These criticisms are arranged according to the following major themes: criticism concerning the theoretical and methodological framework; criticism concerning sources; and criticism concerning historicity of events.

Owens postulates that "because Bierce's Civil War fiction is such a reflection of its author's life and times, a traditional historical-biographical approach seems appropriate for a detailed study of how specific war experiences surface in his fiction and an assessment of their significance to his work" (p. 3). However, by this logic alone all such enquiries would *have to* follow the "traditional" pattern, i.e., the content would dictate the form.

Owens obviously entertains Kantian epistemology, according to which we can have empirical access through our categories of representations of universal truths as they appear to those categories.[1] Thus, he seems to agree that human beings are able to at least approximate truths via the process of deduction independent of the perceiver's (in a Kantian sense) extra-categorical properties. In Bierce's case, the argument runs, since he was an exceptionally accurate cartographer, he would also be an exceptionally accurate historian, disinterestedly deducing the historical content of his works through the benefit of his personal experience.

Consequently, Owens dichotomizes starkly between "fact" and "fiction," a procedure David Hackett Fischer has called "the fallacy of false dichotomy" that leaves little room for alternate, in-between paths.[2] Owens's research correspondingly constitutes a series of argumentative constructs almost amounting to "cases" in a legal sense that seek to locate exactly where the two part ways. He attempts this through an appeal to the historical record, including the biography of Bierce's close

friend and compatriot, William B. Hazen (*A Narrative of Military Service*, 1885). This aspiration is heightened by Owens's strategy of arranging the stories according to Bierce's factual location. However, by treating Beirce as a "trusted historian," Owens fails to take into account criticism made by some Continental philosophers and Hayden White who question the subject/object dichotomy and point out that words are necessarily flattened and culturally conditioned truths and metaphors of the external world. As such, there can be no strict dichotomy between form and its content, nor can a historian be starkly separated from a novelist due to similar strategies both employ. A nod towards these alternative paths would have been desirable. Instead, Owens draws his major thesis (i.e., that Bierce's accounts largely correspond to real events though with a twist here and there) mainly from literary criticism dating from the 1940s and 1960s (p. 122, 127). Owens consequently treats Beirce as someone as free from ambiguities of "interpretation" as possible, due to Beirce's direct and unflinching personality and skills as a cartographer.

I also disagree with Owens that to possess knowledge of war (or, as I think is implied, any historical event) a person has to have personal experience of it, either as a veteran or through personal participation or observation. The argument is countered, most convincingly, by, e.g., Willard Van Orman Quine and J. S. Ullian, who assert that theory always precedes practice.[3] If we proscribe participation as a rule, we would be performing acculturation, not investigation, and history-writing strictly speaking would not be possible because of its traditional *a posteriori* character.[4]

The rest of my criticism centers on Owens's uncritical employment of Hazen's *Narrative*. Though it had a huge impact and Hazen himself influenced Bierce greatly, Owens unassumingly characterizes Hazen's book as containing "fairly detailed descriptions of locations as well as maps of major engagements" (p. 5), while praising Hazen. However, personal memoirs, especially those written at the end of a person's life (Hazen died in 1887), tend to have questionable historical accuracy and usually twist the tale in favour of the teller. By depending on Hazen, Owens's attempts to be accurate and factual suffer in places, especially given his own historical errors.

Regarding the former, based on Hazen, Owens reports that Thomas J. Wood's division formed "four lines of troops" at Pickett's Mill, that Hazen's men were "weary from being heavily engaged," and that Wood and O. O. Howard (as a result of a change in plans) com-

mitted “brigades in a piecemeal fashion rather than in the massive column formation” (p. 86). However, other sources state that there were either three brigade lines or three brigade lines, six ranks deep, and that the formation was kept intact. In addition, Hazen’s brigade, as a part of Howard’s IV Corps, had seen little action immediately before hand, the brunt of the fight having fallen on Joseph Hooker’s XX Corps.[5] Owens asserts that, in George Thomas’s rearguard action at the Battle of Chattanooga, “Hazen was ... instrumental in the defense of Snodgrass Hill” (p. 94). However, the main pressure, coming from Joseph B. Kershaw, was directed to his right, allowing Thomas to disengage from left to right.[6] Likewise, at Kennesaw Mountain, Owens mentions that “Hazen’s Brigade became a part of the battle” (p. 115), while in fact it made no significant contact with the enemy.[7] As to his own questionable assertions, Owens characterizes Nathan Bedford Forrest’s campaign in Athens in September 1864 “one of the last Confederate victories of the war” (p. 51) even though there were several to come. He refers to General Dodge as “Greenville,” although the correct spelling is “Grenville” (p. 75); and asserts that a civil war gun battery had from four to eight guns (p. 78), yet most sources say four to six, except in unusual circumstances. Also, it is controversial whether “the principal focus of the Union efforts [in late summer of 1864] was Sherman’s March to the Sea” (p. 89), since even Atlanta was not taken until early September. The Battle of Chickamauga was not primarily “fought for control of Chattanooga” (p. 93); instead, the objective was William S. Rosecrans’s army.[8] And the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain was fought not “in mid-June and concluded on the twenty-seventh” (p. 115), but on June 20 and 27 respectively: though battle contact was almost constant, Joseph E. Johnston did not arrive at the Ken-

nesaw line proper until June 19.

To conclude, the book does have its limitations, mainly in its lack of scholarly depth and uncritical source criticism, but also its positive sides, including clarity and Biercean certainty, although these are purchased at a price. I will leave the reader to decide which he or she prefers most.

#### Notes

[1]. Alun Munslow, *The Routledge Companion to Historical Studies*, second ed. (London: Routledge, 2006).

[2]. David Hackett Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper-Perennial, 1970), 9-12.

[3]. W. V. O. Quine and J. S. Ullian, *The Web of Belief* (New York: Random House, 1970).

[4]. Mark B. Okrent, “Hermeneutics, Transcendental Philosophy and Social Science,” *Inquiry* 27 (1984): 23-49.

[5]. Henry Woodhead, ed., *Atlanta: Voices of the Civil War Series* (Richmond: Time-Life Books, 1996), 53-54; and Craig L. Symonds, *Joseph E. Johnston: A Civil War Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), 298-299.

[6]. Henry Woodhead, ed., *Chickamauga: Voices of the Civil War Series* (Richmond: Time-Life Books 1997), 103.

[7]. Woodhead, *Atlanta*, 73.

[8]. Jeffrey D. Wert, *General James Longstreet: The Confederacy’s Most Controversial Soldier* (New York: Touchstone, 1994), 303, 307.

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