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THE ATLANTIC REPORT — ON THE WORLD TODAY

How We Will Vote	ARTHUR M. SCHLESINGER, JR.	37
Mihailovich: A Post-Mortem	ROBERT LEE WOLFF	43
The Constant Symbol	ROBERT FROST	50
The Part of Youth	ARCHIBALD MACLEISH	52
Almost Touching the Confederacy	JAMES BRANCH CABELL	56
What Is "Fireproof"?.	MAURICE WEBSTER	60
Little Victor. <i>An Atlantic "First"</i>	ROBERT LEWIS	63
Hitler's Capital. <i>Loot for the Master Race</i>	JAMES S. PLAUT	73
Land Laid Waste	GOVERNOR ELLIS GIBBS ARNALL	79
Flying Buttress. <i>A Poem</i>	A. M. SULLIVAN	84
That Day at Hiroshima	ALEXANDER H. LEIGHTON	85
Serpent Versus Donovan. <i>An Atlantic Story</i>	ALISTAIR MACCRAE	91
Amphibious Warfare	JAMES PHINNEY BAXTER	97
Poems	CONSTANCE CARRIER—ROLFE HUMPHRIES	104
First Personal	RALPH BARTON PERRY	106
Obeah. <i>An Atlantic Story</i>	HENRIETTA FORT HOLLAND	110
Such Is Rachel. <i>An Atlantic "First"</i>	JACQUELINE SHOHET	113
<u>Books and Men</u>		
The Errors of Ralph Ingersoll	CHARLES H. TAYLOR	118
My Wrestle with English	HUGO JOHANSON	122
The Library in Our Town	DOROTHY CANFIELD FISHER	127
The Sunshine of Genius	HAROLD NICOLSON	131
Accent on Living: M. F. K. Fisher — Gordon Kahn — Edwin O'Connor — Frances Eisenberg — Nina Bourne — Percival Price — David Brock		133
Atlantic Bookshelf: Edward Weeks — Howard Mumford Jones — Richard E. Danielson — Short Reviews		144
<u>THE NEW ATLANTIC SERIAL</u>		
Command Decision	WILLIAM WISTER HAINES	167

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ALMOST TOUCHING THE CONFEDERACY

by JAMES BRANCH CABELL

1

ALWAYS afterward it was to seem odd, to look back upon the childhood of that myth which you, during your own childhood, were permitted to witness among those of your elders who defined themselves, without any thought of vainglory, or of being contradicted, as belonging to the best families of Virginia. Like Ulysses before King Alcinoüs in your *Homer's Stories Simply Told*, or like Aeneas at Carthage in *Stories of Old Rome*, your elders, to every side of you, were engaged in retelling the tragedy in which their own part had not been minor. No more than for young George Washington, in your *Child's History of Virginia*, was it conceivable for anyone of them ever to consider perverting the truth consciously. That they were wholly in earnest as to everything which concerned the sacred Lost Cause for which their lives had been risked, and their fortunes demolished, went equally, as people phrase it, without saying. So you meant only that, just now and then, you wondered about your elders.

For the atmosphere of the Richmond of your childhood, to a very marked degree, was elegiac. The Confederacy had fallen, which was bad enough in all conscience; and, which appeared to have been far more horrible, Reconstruction had followed. Here-with one employs the word "horrible" on account of the backwardness of the English language, which, as yet, has not produced any adjective better qualified to express the more lenient aspects of Reconstruction, as your elders viewed Reconstruction. Not until a long while afterward did you have any special notion as to what "Reconstruction" might signify, precisely, because when you first began to remember things you knew only that it had let loose strange monsters, which were called Carpetbaggers; and that these had acted real mean to everybody in Richmond, and over in Petersburg also.

When your elders talked about The War they reminded you of those prophets and the several other people in nightgowns who, according to the full-page

picture in your *Book of Bible Stories*, had sat down by the rivers of Babylon; nor in later years did you change this opinion, materially. You did not mean that your elders behaved in this way upon the banks of the James River or near the Canal. That was where you went fishing.

Instead, it was before the tall writing desks of their grandfathers, or between a dignified pitcher of ice water and a flag of the Confederacy on a gold-painted pole, that your elders sat down very solemnly; and they lamented together, in memoirs and upon memorial days, when they remembered their Zion, that South which had been, and which now was at one with Babylon. They spoke — not without any ardor, nor did they shun the more sturdy graces of elocution — as to a paradise in which they had lived once upon a time, and in which there had been no imperfection, but only beauty and chivalry and contentment. They spoke of womanhood, and of the brightness of hope's rainbow, and of the tomb, and of right upon the scaffold, and of the scroll of fame, and of stars, and of the verdict of posterity. But above all did they speak of a thin line of heroes who had warred for righteousness' sake in vain, and of four years' intrepid battling, even from the McLean farmlands at Bull Run to the McLeans' parlor at Appomattox.

When your elders spoke as to General Robert E. Lee, it was in the tones which other, less fortune-favored nations reserve for divinity, because a god, or at any rate a demigod, had come forth from the Northern Neck of Virginia to dwell in the Confederate States of America; and they who spoke had beheld with their own eyes his serene glory. There was no flaw in it when, upon tall iron-gray Traveller, he had ridden among them, like King Arthur returned from out of Avalon, attended by the resplendent Lancelots and Tristrams and Gareths and Galahads who, once upon a time, had been the other Confederate generals.

And about yet another sublime and gracious being, who resembled wise Merlin, your elders spoke also, calling him Jefferson Davis, and telling about his downfall, and about his imprisonment in a place which was more uncomfortable than Broceliande. All this had happened to Mr. Davis, so you learned

A Virginian, born and bred in Richmond, JAMES BRANCH CABELL is doing what every articulate Southerner would like to do: he is writing a book about his beloved state. The *Atlantic* has already published two affectionate chapters, "A Letter to General Lee" in March, 1946, and "Of Southern Ladies" in May, 1946, and we hope to print more.

gradually, after a great host of very bad people called Yankees, who reminded you of Modred's "great host" in the last chapter of the book that Uncle Landon gave to you one Christmas, had seized on the fair kingdom which really and truly belonged to General Robert E. Lee.

And still later, those Carpetbaggers had come, right into Richmond. Only they were not at all like big caterpillars or large bugs, it was explained to you. They were much worse.

It was confusing, the way in which your elders talked about things which not very long before you were born had happened in Richmond. Because you lived in Richmond: and Richmond was not like Camelot. You could see for yourself that fire-breathing dragons and people in bright armor did not ever go up and down the streets of Richmond, but only some hacks and surreys, and oxcarts hauling tobacco, or it might be a doctor in his buggy, and sometimes a herd of sheep or of cows (which spilled all over the brick sidewalks, and had to be shouted at by men with long sticks), or the boys that were bigger than you were, riding most enviably upon tall bicycles; or perhaps it was just the man with the hand bell and the little grindstone who sharpened your mother's carving knives and scissors, or the hokey-pokey man, or some colored people that were selling fine fresh vegetables out of their cart, or the organ-grinder man with his monkey dressed in unforgettably dusty red velvet.

Anyhow, there were not in Richmond any such old-time things as falchions and damsels and hauberks; Richmond was a completely up-to-date modern city, which had re-arisen triumphantly, like a phoenix from out of its ashes, so everybody said; and the way in which your elders talked really did remind you of your *Stories of the Days of King Arthur*, by Charles Henry Hanson, with Illustrations by Gustave Doré.

That was a very nice book, you thought at this season. It was a grayish-blue and rather small book. Upon the cover of it was a brickdust-colored picture of Sir Gawaine, with an edifice of curly plumage on top of his helmet, and ostentatiously undulant for a good distance behind it also, as he rode toward the Green Chapel, which "was the most perilous place in the world"; and "this compilation contains" — so did the chapter that was called "Preface" tell you — "an epitome of the Arthurian Legends" in which (as was declared farther on) "no occasional allusions and episodes which make them unfit to be placed in the hands of juvenile readers . . . have been retained." You liked this book very much. But you could not understand why almost everything that in public your elders said about The War seemed, somehow, to have come out of this book.

2

MOREOVER, you noticed that your elders did not speak in the same way when they were just talking

to one another in your father's drugstore, or in your mother's dining room at Sunday night supper (when everybody ate out of the best plates, which had a different sort of bright-colored bird painted upon each one of them), or when your elders were playing whist in the big and high-ceilinged, pale-brown back-parlor of your grandfather's house, down upon Governor Street. When, with all eight of the gas jets lighted overhead, in the gleaming copper and crystal-hung huge chandelier, your elders played whist, pensively and without any excitations, then they used to save time, and avoid argument, by turning up the very last card in the pack so as to find out at once what was going to be trumps. And upon such reflective occasions they would talk differently about The War and the people who had been in it.

They would speak, for instance, of Abraham Lincoln. You recollected afterward that never did you hear them speak, in private, as to Abraham Lincoln with enmity. If your elders had found in his life a great deal which demanded praise, then they must have withstood these demands with success; but his death was regretted — upon grounds that were wholly practical, so you observed later — as having been to the South a misfortune. Had Abraham Lincoln lived, the South would have been dealt with more mercifully and more decently, said your elders. That he was a poor-white and untidy person, they said also; he, in short, was tacky: but the man was well-meaning. Those stories which your elders had heard, and which they repeated urbanely, as to his private life, were rather curious sounding sometimes. You did not understand, for some while to come, what the joke was about in a number of them; and he seemed, too, to have had a lot of fathers.

Yet these anecdotes, if spiced with derision, remained unflavored by malice. Your elders did but laugh — "high and disposedly" — to remember that small-town lawyer whom those Yankees had thought fit to be their President. He, in the opinion of your elders, most certainly was. That Mr. Lincoln had displayed any element of greatness was a suspicion which did not occur to your elders. Mr. Lincoln was regretted unresonantly, without raising one's polite soft voice, as a shrewd but not unamiable politician, whose death, which was an ill-advised affair in the manner of its occurrence also, had happened to expose a conquered South to the oppression that he, living, would have opposed. Young Booth, in brief, through the most excellent of motives, had made a tragic blunder. That, so nearly as you could word this matter, during the long years which were to come later, seemed to be the opinion of your elders as to what, in their belief, had been Mr. Lincoln's unfortunate and involuntary importance. They almost always called him "Mr. Lincoln," with formal politeness.

And in the cause of vividness, you came by-and-by to regret this opinion. You very much would have preferred to record that your elders spoke with a

more lively emotion about Abraham Lincoln, either as an heroic enemy or as an abhorred enemy. But in point of fact they did not, because at no time were they much interested in their fallen opponent, as a person, either one way or the other.

"Young Booth, through the most excellent of motives, had made a tragic blunder." Such, one can but repeat, was the verdict of well-bred Virginia as to Abraham Lincoln's murder, at a time when you were still in short trousers and long stockings stragglingly divorced by a neutral zone of chapped flesh. For John Wilkes Booth had been admired as an actor and liked as a person, immediately before the War Between the States, when for some two years he had figured handsomely, in and about Virginia's capital city, as a member of Mr. Kunkel's Stock Company; Virginia did not know Lincoln except by reports, the most of which were ungrandiose; and moreover, not even the most highly gifted of your elders was able quite to anticipate a reunited republic's final verdict as to the unfortunate commemoration of your birthday a good fourteen years ahead of time. You, it is to be feared, thought, while your elders talked, that the most interesting thing about this sort of mixed-up sounding Mr. Lincoln was, after all, his having been shot on your birthday.

Such memories troubled you, by-and-by, after your knowledge as to Abraham Lincoln's now accepted importance had been enlarged; and you became perturbed when you tried to imagine anyone of your once familiar elders, who had known John Wilkes Booth, as being buttonholed by Mr. Carl Sandburg during Mr. Sandburg's gathering of the needed data for his definitive large Life of Lincoln.

"Sir," Mr. Sandburg would inquire of your boyhood's acquaintance, just as Mr. Sandburg has inquired of the present age, "who was this Booth? What was he like? In what kind of a green-poison pool of brain and personality had the amazing and hideous crime arisen?"

"Why, I can but tell you —" the well-bred Virginian would reply.

"— For out of a mediocre fame and a second-rate reputation as a mimic," Mr. Sandburg would continue, "this Booth has wrapped the letters of his name with a weird infamy synonymous with Enemy of Mankind. His name on a thousand occasions is to go unspoken with loathing for the unspeakable and untouchable; a pitiless, dripping, carnivorous, slavered, subhuman and antihuman beast mingling snake and tiger; the unmentionable; the American Judas with a brain that was a haunted house of monsters of vanity, of vampires and bats of hallucination."

To which the Virginian would answer in winged words such as, after reflection, you preferred not to imagine, because in permitting them to pass the barrier of his teeth, he might laugh (also Homerically) on account of some superficial differences between Middle Western rhetoric in anything which concerns Lincoln and the South's rhetoric as to the

Confederacy. Yet it seemed to you that instead of laughing he would say, just as he did of old: —

"Young Booth, sir, through the most excellent of motives, made a tragic blunder."

And the Virginian, the unchangeable Virginian of the 1880's, would thus dismiss the entire matter serenely.

3

FOR the main business in life of your elders was to create a myth which was not intimately concerned with the perhaps equally great myth of Lincoln, and which in consequence did not need to clash with it. They were creating (so did you decide later), in the same instant that they lamented the Old South's extinction, an Old South which had died proudly at Appomattox without ever having been smirched by the wear and tear of existence. They perverted no facts consciously; but they did omit, from their public utterances or from their printed idyllic narratives, with the tact of a correctly reared person, any such facts as appeared undesirable — without, of course, ever disclaiming these facts.

A gentleman, in brief, does not tell lies. There is no ruling which denies to him a judicious amount of reticence.

So you noticed, for example, when in private your elders talked about him who had reminded you of wise Merlin, that they did not really like this Mr. Jefferson Davis or admire very many of his doings. They stated their reasons, in terms which you found to be incomprehensible and of no large interest, because you were wondering why Mr. Davis appeared to be an entirely different person when people talked about him upon platforms. And some of the more prominent knights of the Confederate Round Table seemed to have been like that also, when, at supper or during those leisured whist games, your elders spoke about them.

Your elders told then how one of these heroes had been a trifle too drunk to sit upon his horse at any time during the battle which made him famous, and so had not been able to take part in this special battle. And nobody blamed him, of course, for what was really a rather good joke on the strapping daredevil; it was just a bit of bad luck which might have happened to almost anyone. Quite otherwise did your elders discourse as to another illustrious person, who, so they said, had hid in a barn when he ought to have been fighting; and who had been forced, quietly, to get out of Virginia, and to go north, where, in addition to being made a judge, he had become a professional Confederate veteran with a prestige so enormous that it still nurtures his descendants. None envied him these glories; nor did anyone wish to remove his bogus luster from out of that which, upon platforms, your elders called the eternal roster of fame. It was simply that he could not ever again come back to Virginia.

Your elders spoke also as to the final words of a

far more stupendously great hero, which, it appeared, were not the soldierly utterance that is set down in every Confederate Arthuriad, but a request for the bedpan; as to with how large thrift yet another pre-eminent idol of the Confederacy had behaved in renting out his renown, for advertising purposes, to a pack of gamblers, year after year; as to the manner in which an out-at-elbows paladin had apostatized in order to become an ambassador; and as to the quaint fury with which a half-dozen or more ex-chieftains of the Lost Cause were now publishing a surplus of inconvenient candors in their depreciation of one another. Nor was this by any means all that which your elders talked about, in their quiet and matter-of-fact and half-amused voices, as to the divinities, and as to the wives of those divinities, whom in public they worshiped.

To a child, who could not understand that for the health of human ideals every national myth needs to be edited and fostered with an unfailing patience, the discrepancy was puzzling; but you did reason it out, by-and-by. Your elders were not telling any lies, either in private or upon memorial days, about their technically unstained and superhuman heroes, or at least not exactly. It was just that grown people told only a part of the truth when they climbed up on platforms, and did not talk about things which were not nice, such as getting drunk, or like bedpans.

And it seemed to you remarkable, in later years, that you could not recall hearing your elders talk about any of the Union generals, except only a very little bit about a General Sherman, who burned up houses, and perhaps slightly more than that about an oddly named General Beast Bütler, who appeared to have stolen some teaspoons. That which your elders said as to "Mr. Lincoln" has been recorded; but they did not talk much about Abraham Lincoln, either. They liked better to talk about their own people. And if constantly they derided Yankees, or if in particular they denounced the wicked doings of Carpetbaggers, yet, as you remembered it afterward, to neither one of these evil races was granted the distinction of surnames. So did they remain to you, at this time, an anonymous and unaccounted-for "great host" such as at Salisbury Plain had destroyed King Arthur.

Your elders, in brief, were not mad with the people who had invaded and seized upon the fair kingdom which really and truly belonged to General Robert E. Lee. That seemed kind of funny. They were not even very much interested in those Yankee soldiers who had killed off a lot of your own uncles and cousins. It was only when they talked about Carpetbaggers. Carpetbaggers must have been rather like ogres, or perhaps they were churls and fell

caitiffs, you decided. Because you were getting sort of sleepy. It must be almost nine o'clock. Anyhow, whenever grown-up people talked about Carpetbaggers, they would get mad as a wet hen. But that did not last for more than a little while. Pretty soon they would go back to talking, almost as if they were sitting in church instead of right here in your grandfather's back-parlor, about what a real fine place the South used to be, and Virginia in particular.

They were making history after a time-approved fashion. Even in the same instant that, westward and northward, about the benign figure of Abraham Lincoln, as the messiah of the United States of America, was being assembled an epitome of legends in which no "occasional allusions and episodes which make them unfit to be placed in the hands of juvenile readers . . . have been retained," just so in Virginia was being edited and amended and enhanced, after the same chaste manner of Charles Henry Hanson, our own epic of the Old South. In both instances, loyalty required of each myth's makers that more or less should be left out, and that an appreciable deal should be recolored, for the good of mankind at large. And in both instances the reshapers and the editors of these national myths, with the naïve duplicity of all other devout artists in fiction, even while they observed with some human pride how very far they had bettered veracity, yet, in part, believed their romanticizing to be wholly veracious.

You found it difficult to explain, this bifold mood in which human beings create, as though by instinct, the one sort of history which their descendants can find profitable; and which alone, because of this mood, their descendants do acquire and try to keep faith with. You at least could not ever explain this half-mythopoeic and half-critical frame of mind, not quite intelligibly, not even to yourself. You knew only that, in Richmond, during your childhood, you had seen this dual mood about its beneficent labors. And you believed that for anyone of us to investigate, in the bleak light of common-sense, these two twin noble myths of the Old South's perfection and of Abraham Lincoln's perfection — or to condemn yet any other legend about our forefathers' perfection, to become not unworthy of which a delusion may spur us — would be to repeat the unthrift of prying Ham and of ill-judging Esau, those deficient inheritors.

For each one of them, as you recalled from afar your long-perished *Book of Bible Stories*, had lost all which rightfully had belonged to him. That meant something rather important, you decided. It meant that for human beings it might be wiser, even at the price of some inconsistency, to maintain the beliefs that were agreeable and inspiring and magnanimous.