

Philip Gerard

Seeing the Elephant from *Secret Soldiers*

... WHEN JOINT SECURITY CONTROL AUTHORIZED the activation of the 23rd Headquarters Special Troops, it built the unit around the camouflaged battalion, and for good reason: The British had demonstrated camouflage was the key to battlefield deception. And for the British, camouflage already meant not just hiding the real but showing the fake in such a way that its "fakeness" was concealed. The Special Troops took camouflage to a new level—they actually created faulty camouflage, camouflage designed to draw attention to fake objects. They were hiding the fake by making it seem real enough to hide. The whole mission took on a postmodern flavor. They were engaged in persuading an enemy to make a decision by altering his perception: things were not as they appeared.

The French Surrealists, many of whom had served as camoufleurs in the First World War, would have been delighted at the turnabout. Their signature technique was placing a physical object in an alien context, thereby creating an absurdity—a technique so familiar by now in art, movies, and advertising as to seem clichéd. But it is a technique that challenges not only our assumptions—whether an object is in the context where it "belongs"—but also our perceptions: What are we really seeing, and why is it there? What could be more absurd than an inflated rubber object on a battlefield? The camoufleurs called them "balloons" or even "rubber ducks," recognizing the joke. The inflated tanks were toys, more suitable for a child's playground than a killing zone.

If one can imagine the whole of the European battlefield as a giant "picture," a German High Command wall map that graphically illustrated the progress of the war, the Special Troops were painting on a huge canvas. By creating nonexistent armies and concealing the whereabouts of real ones, they were fragmenting the coherent picture, disrupting the overall pattern, altering perception on a grand scale.

In effect, they were camouflaging the Allied order of battle—a military term that means what it sounds like: which armies are where, and what objectives they will attack and when.

In the phrase of the old practical joke, camouflet, this was blowing smoke up the enemy's nose in a big way. It was the ultimate hiding of the real—secret soldiers moving armies around like pieces on a game board. The hand was quicker than the eye: some of the armies were real, others merely imaginary, and only a chosen few knew the difference.

This was the new mission of the Special Troops—camouflage used in a highly sophisticated way. It required a new level of creativity, and with that came a new level of risk. "It was thinking on the spot," Rebh says. "Training on the spot."

"We didn't know how to teach them," Simenson says. "We didn't know all the techniques. We had to learn them on the battlefield."

They would get their next tutorial at Brest—a costly lesson that would haunt Simenson for the rest of his life.

This excerpt was taken from Gerard's *Secret Soldiers: How a Troupe of American Artists, Designers, and Sonic Wizards Won World War II's Battle of Deception against the Germans* (Dutton, 2002; reprinted in paperback by Plume, 2003).

"What most attracted me to the story of the 'Secret Soldiers' was that they were artists—not just in their civilian lives, but in the way they waged war," says Gerard. "They created a fictional diorama on a colossal battlefield, and so saved lives by risking their own and using their wits. It was all very postmodern."

The Burning of the Record *from Cape Fear Rising*

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 1898

SAFFRON WAS STILL ASLEEP in Miz Gabrielle's sewing room. The headless dressmaker's dummy stood in the corner, draped with folds of fine satin for Gray Ellen Jenks' evening gown. Bessie King busied herself in the kitchen.

David hadn't come back last night. Bessie didn't know exactly where he was. If there was trouble, that boy would find it, though he was a good boy at heart. Everybody said so. But he didn't think too clear. He was the kind of boy things happened to, never the right things.

Bessie served Colonel Waddell in the dining room, where he ate alone. He seemed all stirred up this morning, high color in his cheeks. Kept rubbing his legs and cursing softly. "Damned cavalry legs." Let him suffer, she thought. Pain was a boon to character.

She ducked into the pantry to fetch another jar of marmalade, and there she saw it: her spider, hanging on her web—upside down—an omen of death.

"Lordy," she said out loud, and crossed herself. She grabbed the marmalade and went out quickly.

"Something spook you?" the Colonel asked her as she clattered down a plate of eggs, bacon and cheese grits in front of him.

She looked at him and saw a ghost. She saw him melting away like a haint, a bad dream of a bad man. "No, suh," she said, ducking her head.

"Do you know what today is, Aunt Bessie? What anniversary?"

"Suh?"

"Ninety-nine years ago Napoleon seized the throne of France."

"Yes, suh."

He sipped coffee. "Go see if Miz Gabby is up yet." Gabrielle deRosset Waddell, his young wife, who slept in her own room. "When you've served her breakfast, make yourself scarce."

"Yes, Colonel."

"And Aunt Bessie? Stay off the streets today."

"Colonel?"

He smiled. "Nothing you'd understand," he said, and forked into his eggs. "Just politics."

She left in a swish of skirts and he ate with gusto. He'd need a hearty meal today. Lately his appetite was enormous. His muscles were stretching, unbending, craving exercise, like the muscles of a young man. His brain was humming like an electric coil. His voice was tuned and strong. Only his legs gave him pain—cramps, poor circulation, knees that grated. Nothing a good brisk walk wouldn't cure.

In his mind, he counted off the men he would have to contend with. Hugh MacRae was the most formidable—but for the time being their interests coincided. And Hugh's brother Donald did as Hugh told him.

Next in order of prominence came the Taylor brothers. Colonel Walker Taylor, officially in charge of the State Guards, could be a problem. He seemed to want to run things. But he favored posture—intimidation and threat—over outright violence. Stand up straight, shoulder to shoulder, and you won't have to fire a shot. That was good. Walker Taylor had high-minded ideas about duty and honor. He would act with restraint. Still, if all hell broke loose, he was a brave man who would give orders to shoot to kill. Waddell must be careful when and how to use him.

J. Allan Taylor, who held no official claim to anything, was the brother to watch. He had close ties to Hugh MacRae and lacked Walker's patience and restraint. He would charge in and do the job, quick and dirty and mean. He wanted results. He didn't much care about the legal niceties—he was used to fixing them up later. He was still bitter about how much his father had lost in the war, and he aimed to get it back any way he could. If you crossed him, he was the kind of man who would pull a pistol and shoot you between the eyes in front of a hundred witnesses, then go take his supper.

George Rountree was the smartest of the bunch. Waddell liked him the least. In some ways, they thought alike—Rountree was scouting out the board three moves ahead of everybody else. And they both served the law. But Rountree was a fanatic on the subject: he wouldn't cross the street without the proper paperwork. He knew precedents and counter-precedents, ordinances and codes, right down to their subsections and footnotes.

For Waddell the law was a drama, the courtroom a theatre—exactly like the Courthouse meeting. The broad sweep of justice ranged from tragedy to farce. Each trial had its own set of players, protagonist and antagonist, and a rising curve of suspense as they struggled toward the climax—that moment of decision after which nothing would ever be the same.

At the center of each trial was the nut: one actor wants something, and the other will stop at nothing to keep him from having it. A stage-managed combat by proxy. The consequences might be staggering—fines, punitive damages, hard labor for years, life imprisonment, even death.

But for George Rountree, the drama was a nuisance. Human passions interfered with the law. The law lived in books. The law was the fiction everyone in the community had agreed upon so that their collective life might proceed with a semblance of order and decorum. The law was a kind of story that had already mostly been written, told over and over again. From time to time, one needed to revise it— as he was already revising the role of negroes and the ballot, Waddell knew.

In the courtroom, Rountree was formidable. He could not match Waddell for fiery eloquence, for inflaming hearts and winning over an audience of nervous jurors. Instead Rountree relied on the inexorable momentum of logic—fact following fact, figure proving figure, nothing overlooked, crushing his opponent by sheer weight of proof. Rountree won his cases in the law library.

Rountree thrived on information, Waddell reasoned, on knowing more than anybody else. The way to keep him off-balance, then, was to keep him in the dark. Already, at Waddell's urging, Hugh MacRae had cut him out of some key meetings. Time to cut him out of a few more.

Waddell pulled out his gold watch—already after seven. Before he had finished his plate, the committee men began to arrive. Within a few minutes, they filled up his parlor, dining room, and library, milling about, pouring coffee down their throats, all dressed up and talking in low tones, like a board of directors.

Aunt Bessie disappeared—she had not even removed the breakfast dishes. Miz Gabby had not come down yet. What ailed her lately? No matter—women had no part in this morning's business. And where was that reporter, Samuel Jenks? He had sent word for Jenks to meet him here bright and early. For what they were about to do, he wanted his biographer close at hand.

J. Allan Taylor stood in the entryway, thumbs hooked in the waistband of his trousers. He was nearly as tall as his brother Walker but lacked his bulk. He was a man with no room for extras. Every few minutes he yanked his watch out of his vest, snapped it open like he was knifing open an oyster, then dropped it back into the flannel pocket.

Hugh MacRae said, "Expecting somebody?"

"You don't think the niggers will send word?"

MacRae barely smiled. "As if that matters,"

"But if they give in to everything—"

MacRae clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Now listen, John. They can all sign over the deeds to their houses, it wouldn't change what we have to do."

Taylor took his thumbs out of his waistband. "I'm just thinking of George. He'll hold us to the paper. Like some goddamned contract or something."

MacRae had sent word to Rountree after yesterday's meeting that the thing was settled: no call for drastic measures. "You let me handle George." MacRae's eyes were flinty and bright, his face ruddy and smooth from good health and exercise. This morning he moved in a kind of aura. His heather tweeds were crisp. His riding boots—which he rarely wore on a business day—were spit-shined to a rich chocolate brown. His thinning blond hair was slicked in a side part, his ears as pink as if he'd been standing in the cold for an hour. He fairly glowed.

Beside him Waddell seemed spectral, a black-and-white figure cut from the fabric of an earlier century: pale gray eyes sunk in deep dark circles, silver hair and spiked goatee sheeny with oil, moustaches waxed to stiff points, high celluloid collar yellow against the white of his throat, his black clawhammer coat both ridiculous and somber at this hour of the morning.

With great ceremony, Waddell consulted his watch. Where was Jenks? No matter—he couldn't wait any longer. "Gentlemen," he said in a soft, deep voice, then snapped his watch case shut as if it were loaded to fire. "Time."

MacRae donned his brown slouch hat, precisely blocked into a campaign crown, and led the committee of twenty-five across the porch and down the middle of Fifth Street to Market, where his saddled horse stood waiting at the armory. To J. Allan Taylor, he said, "Never doubt me, John."

Striding hard on his sore legs, Colonel Waddell passed up the line of men and took his place at the head, beside MacRae and Taylor. In a few minutes, he would ride. He was walking so fast the breeze pushed at the broad front brim of his plumed chapeau, the same one he'd worn at Richmond and the Petersburg Pike. His hand reached reflexively to his left hip to pat the hilt of his cavalry saber—but in the rush he had forgotten to buckle it on.

Sam Jenks met him coming the other way, greeted Waddell and his cousin MacRae and fell into step with them. He could tell by the look on MacRae's face that these men were out to do serious business this morning. He could almost smell their nervous adrenaline, rank as sweat.

The Light Infantry had been mustering at the armory since before dawn. Everything had been arranged. All the right people had been told. Every man had his assignment. When Waddell's party arrived, Donald MacRae and Captain James were waiting. Several hundred men, armed with Winchesters and Colt pistols, were milling about in the yard by the steps. Some of them had spent the night guarding the First Baptist Church or patrolling the neighborhoods, reporting in at intervals to Colonel Roger Moore, Grand Marshal of the vigilantes. Moore had set up a command post a few blocks from Waddell's house in the other direction, at Fifth and Chestnut.

Moore had stopped by Waddell's house as a courtesy on the previous evening. During the War Between the States, he had served with Waddell in the 41st Regiment of the Third North Carolina Cavalry. Moore had been commissioned a major on the same day Waddell had received his colonelcy. When Waddell had gone ill, Moore had taken over command of the regiment.

Waddell figured a command post was a good place for Colonel Moore this morning— one less chief to contend with. Let him wait there until they sent him his orders.

When the assembled mob caught sight of Waddell, MacRae, and the other committee men, they cheered and pressed closer toward the armory, waiting for the word. The mob parted to let the leaders ascend the marble steps and enter the armory.

Standing just inside the thick double doors, Hugh and his brother, Captain Donald MacRae, conferred briefly. Donald was still technically in command of the Light Infantry men who had volunteered for the Cuban campaign but never got there. "Form up your men," Hugh MacRae said without any inflection. His voice resounded in the high space. Waddell and J. Allan Taylor stood to either side.

Sam Jenks, loitering a step behind, said, "I don't get it— you're going to use force? But—"

"Keep quiet," MacRae said. "It's time to make a point."

Donald MacRae hesitated and rubbed his sharp chin. "I still hold my commission in the U.S. Army, Hugh," he said. "There may be ramifications."

J. Allan Taylor said, "He's right, Hugh— they could court-martial him for this. It would give them a pretext to send the Federals down—"

"Goddamnit!" He recovered his calm. "Why didn't you say something yesterday?"

"It didn't occur to me yesterday—"

"Get Colonel Moore on the telephone." On the wall in the meeting parlor just off the corridor hung the telephone. They clustered around it while MacRae rang Moore's house. He wasn't there— of course he wasn't there, Waddell reflected: MacRae must not know about the command post. Had Moore coordinated all that with Walker Taylor? MacRae didn't bother himself with particulars. He was the master of the big picture.

Next, they rang Moore's office, but of course he wasn't there, either. Waddell knew that Colonel Moore was barely two blocks away, waiting by a telephone for this very call, but he didn't say anything. MacRae hung up, looking baffled. His hair was mussed and there was soot on the sleeve of his tweed coat where he'd rubbed against the fireplace mantle.

"Get Walker on the telephone," J. Allan Taylor suggested. "Christ—why isn't he here already?"

MacRae rang him at home. "Walk? We've got a situation here. Come on over and straighten us out. We need a good officer out front." Then he listened, pressing the earpiece hard against his pink ear.

"What's he giving you?" J. Allan Taylor said. "Let's get on with this."

"Goddamnit, haul your fat ass over here!" MacRae shouted into the trumpet. The composure was gone from his voice. As he cursed into the trumpet, his tenor went shrill and broke. His face went scarlet. He listened some more. "We need some leadership on this thing."

"Let me talk to him," J. Allan Taylor said. He reached for the earpiece, but MacRae held onto it with a white fist.

Sam said, "I still don't see why—" Waddell grabbed him, hard.

"No, the city is not threatened, Walk, not directly. Christ Jesus—we've gone over all that! But this thing is necessary. The long-term threat is there. We've got to do this thing. We talked about that—" Walker Taylor must be shouting into the other end now, because they all could hear the shrill buzz of his voice rattling the earpiece.

"We may not need you later! Later may be too late—"

"Let me go get him," Donald MacRae offered. "He's only a block away."

MacRae ignored him and stared at the wall, still shouting. "We can't stop it now— it's too late, man!" He listened again, stamping his foot. "The Pinkertons' report? We talked to the Pinkertons!" Pause. "I don't give a good hoot in hell if you've changed your mind!"

Donald MacRae shook his head and stared at the Italian marble floor. J. Allan Taylor stood by, wringing his hands, imagining what his namesake grandfather would do at this moment if he were standing right here beside them in the family house he had built. They were all letting Hugh down. It was all a matter

of technicalities. Rountree must have been talking to Walker—it had his stamp all over it. Legalities—that's all it was. Paper laws.

Hugh MacRae clapped the earpiece into the cradle so hard he nearly tore the wooden telephone box off the wall. He didn't have to explain—they'd all caught the gist.

Sam had never seen MacRae so worked up—almost too angry to speak.

"Do it yourself," J. Allan said.

MacRae shook his head violently. "That's not my place. It's a military operation, That's how we planned the goddamned thing." He chopped the air with his hands. "We want action taken by the proper authorities." He swore again. "I thought I had some goddamned soldiers I could count on—"

His brother Donald said, "Tom James can do it. He's out on the steps."

MacRae flung open the big doors and marched out, boots clucking, onto the marble steps. The mob cheered. At the fringes, Red Shirts collected in knots and pumped their rifles over their heads. "Let's go get the niggers!" one of them cried, and the rest broke out in a chorus of cheering and hurrahs. They pressed in closer.

Sam was scared in his stomach: this mob had an air of premeditation—it was no spontaneous lynching party. These men had waited all night for this moment. Some had been waiting weeks. The inflammatory articles in the newspapers, the rousing hate speeches, the bogus election—everything had been moving toward this. And Sam's job was to write the story.

The infantrymen and several squads of naval reserves stood in loose formation in the side yard, checking their weapons.

Hugh MacRae said, "Captain James, if you please."

Captain James turned on his heel, looking puzzled.

"Captain MacRae requests you take command of this operation."

Captain James backed up a step, glanced sidelong at the mob, looked to Donald MacRae for some explanation. Donald MacRae stood with his brother and said nothing. "What—me lead that mob?" Captain James said.

The MacRaes nodded. The blood rose in Captain James' face. Automatically, he braced himself at attention. "I am a soldier," he said. "I won't lead a mob."

Sam scribbled James' reply in his notebook—he wanted to get it right. He understood it immediately to be a defining moment, a vivid declaration of character. He wished he himself were capable of such a moment.

Donald MacRae said, "Somebody has to do it—"

"Not me—never. I won't."

Hugh MacRae swore. Donald MacRae turned up his palms. "Be reasonable, Tom—"

Waddell stood beside them, beaming, then took one calculated step toward the crowd. "Waddell!" Solomon Fishblate shouted from the front of the crowd, and others took up the chant: "Waddell! Waddell! Waddell!" He stood at the edge of the top step and let them cheer. He waved. He bowed deeply from the waist, sweeping his plumed hat across his body in a graceful flourish.

Two of the Red Shirts grabbed him bodily and hauled him through the parting crowd, then hoisted him onto a horse. The stirrups were too long, but never mind that, he thought. He took the reins in one hand and, in a gesture he had not used in thirty-five years, lifted the other easily, naturally, palm open. He waited till the men had turned their attention from the armory steps to him. He sat above the crowd, feeding on their upturned faces, hand still raised. "We tried to reason with the niggers," he said, "but they have defied us. Alex Manly is still at large, free to slander the good name of our women. I say this nonsense has gone on long enough!"

The men hurrahed.

"Today we march on the nigger newspaper and seize Manly—are you with me?"

The din rattled the windows of the armory. With all eyes fastened on him, he casually let his arm drop forward as if he were tossing a baseball, and their cheers started his horse forward up Market Street.

Hugh MacRae stood momentarily paralyzed. It was too late to stop Waddell. He had picked his moment with perfection—outflanked him again. Colonel Moore, Walker Taylor, Tom James, even his own brother Donald, all had failed him at the moment of truth. He swore a string of oaths. J. Allan Taylor grabbed MacRae's arm and led him around back to their stabled horses. "Come on, Hugh—we can catch ahold of this thing yet."

Sam Jenks sprinted down the steps and followed the mob.

On the bone-white marble steps of the armory, Captain James watched them go. When the infantrymen formed up in ranks and started marching out of the yard, he leaped off the steps and stopped them. "If you follow that mob, leave your tunic here!" he shouted. The men milled about uncertainly.

Lieutenant White, the drillmaster, who wore wire-rimmed spectacles and styled himself after Colonel Roosevelt, said to Donald MacRae, "Captain—are we not to do our part?"

"I'm in command here," Captain James said. "If the city is threatened, we will move to keep the peace."

Donald MacRae swore, threw up a helpless hand, and retired inside the building.

The men remained standing in ranks, muttering. The tail of the mob was almost out of sight now, and a straggle of men and boys who had arrived late were sprinting through the pall of lime dust to catch up to it.

"At ease," Captain James said. "Stack your weapons. Go on about your business. But don't leave the compound." The men shifted from foot to foot, talked briefly among themselves, swatted their gray, white-plumed hats against their thighs, and, with an exaggerated air of disappointment, began falling out. There were coffee and biscuits inside—they could smell the woodsmoke from the old iron cookstove in the basement club rooms.

Colonel Alfred Moore Waddell walked his horse so that the men behind him could keep up. Mounted Red Shirts took up positions as outriders, Winchesters cocked on thighs. By the time Waddell reached the turn onto Seventh, the mob stretched out two blocks behind him, all the way back to the Wilmington Light Infantry armory.

Waddell made the turn onto Seventh Street with five hundred men trailing him. MacRae rode somewhere behind him—he didn't look back to see. An army could have only one leader. Mike Dowling, captain of the Red Shirts, jogged along the flank on his skittish sorrel, his red tunic-front shirt freshly laundered for the occasion. Among the marchers on foot were ex-mayor Solomon Fishblate and the Reverend Peyton Hoge, both carrying Winchesters.

From out of nowhere appeared Father Dennen, the Catholic priest, waving his arms to stop them. "For the love of Jesus, boys, you can't do this!" he shouted. "You can't do this—"

Waddell's horse shouldered past him and the priest went sprawling onto the oystershell. He picked himself up and dusted himself off in a cloud of lime dust, grabbing men by the elbow, pleading for tolerance. But the sheer momentum of the mob carried him along and spit him out into the gutter, where he lay, stunned, and watched hundreds of wild-eyed men stream past.

Seventh was a quiet residential street. The mob flowed noisily along the narrow, tree-shaded corridor between modest frame houses, moving fast. They trampled flower beds, scattered stray dogs, sent whole wings of blackbirds exploding out of the twisted live oaks in black frenzied bursts.

A Red Shirt fired his rifle into the air. Pretty soon a dozen ragged shots cracked into the overhanging branches. A shotgun boomed twice, bringing down a rain of twigs and shredded leaves. Men hooted and yelled. A frightened horse kicked down a picket fence at the corner of Dock. At Orange Street, a team of matched grays pulling a landau reared up at the sudden appearance of the mob and the carriage fetched up against a porch, its front wheel busted. Dr. Silas Wright,

the mayor, peered out of the landau, clutching the useless reins in his white gloves, praying to go unrecognized.

The mob rushed through the neighborhood like a flash flood, carrying away everything in its path. White women stared out from behind curtains. Occasionally men ran outside to join the mob, buttoning their flies as they ran, pulling on coats, their pockets bulging with shotgun shells.

Past Orange Street, the faces turned darker. Negro workingmen, sleeping off the late shift at the mills, were roused abruptly. They fled out their back doors barefoot, wearing only flannel union suits. Many of the women were already at work in the better homes across town. Children dived under beds and into crawlspaces, stared through the broken boards of slat fences.

By the time it roared past the Williston School on Ann Street, the mob had swelled to almost a thousand men. Now Waddell could see a church and a white building just in front of it that must be Free Love Hall. The sign, The Record Publishing Company, still hung from the second floor. A face appeared in the upstairs window, then disappeared. Waddell reined up at the front door, men milling so close around him that he could not move his feet in the stirrups. All at once, he realized he was unarmed. The upraised barrel of a Winchester was bobbing out of the crowd on his right. He gripped the barrel, hauled it out of the owner's hands, and planted the butt on his thigh.

As the mob fetched up and surrounded the building, it went deathly silent, all at once, as if its angry roar had been caused by the constant movement. Waddell looked behind him onto a sea of hats. Rifle barrels poked up among the hats, here and there a brickbat.

Waddell held up his hand—an old cavalry habit. He drew himself up in the saddle and addressed the closed door. "Open up, in the name of the white citizens of Wilmington!" On cue, a dismounted Red Shirt hammered at the door with a brickbat. "We want Manly!" Waddell proclaimed.

Nobody answered.

Carefully, without turning, he backed his horse away from the door and gave a casual signal with his left hand. The mob spit out two men in overalls, each hefting a fire axe. Taking turns, they whacked at the door until it splintered off its hinges. Inside stood a lone negro, transfixed, wide-open mouth bubbling with saliva. A voice shouted, "Manly!" A little pistol cracked and the negro grabbed his neck, reeling as if he'd been punched. Then he vanished.

The mob rushed into Free Love Hall after him, but he was gone out the back. They slipped on his blood.

They smashed chairs and tables with nine-pound railroad mauls, gouged the walls with axes, shattered the windows with rifle butts and brickbats. They swarmed upstairs to the printing room and found the Hoe Press. Four men heaved

against it, but they could not budge it. So they overturned the drawers full of type, scattering the heavy leaden letters across the floor. They smashed more windows, busted every piece of furniture in sight, swept carefully filed stacks of back numbers of the Record off the shelves, then pulled down the shelves. Swinging axes and mauls, they pulverized two typewriters, a beer mug full of sharpened pencils, an old rolltop desk, and a glass paperweight.

Mike Dowling was so caught up in the melée that, by the time he had finished smashing things, the Winchester in his hand had a broken stock and a bent barrel. He flung it away, gave a blood-curdling rebel yell, and crawled out the window toward The Record Publishing Company sign. Hands gripped him by the belt as, swimming in thin air, he tore it loose from its chains and flung it down into the street. The mob axed it into kindling.

Downstairs, two Red Shirts discovered a storage closet. They smashed the padlock with a maul and raked cans of kerosene and turpentine off the shelves. Other men shouldered them aside, grabbed the tins of kerosene and turpentine, and doused the broken furniture. Somebody struck a match. The men upstairs barely got out as the flames flared into the rafters.

Outside Free Love Hall, Waddell was furious. The mob was out of control. They had come to get Manly, and Manly had fled. Somebody had already been shot— what had become of him? Was he Alex Manly? Other men were firing freely into the flames. "Call the fire brigade!" he yelled to one of Dowling's men who merely grinned at him and popped off another round.

Solly Fishblate found Waddell. "I've put in a call to the negro fire brigade," he shouted.

"Can't you do something about these Red Shirts?"

"Should have thought of that before."

The flames were leaping out of the roof now, and the northerly breeze threatened to spread the fire to the church next door. That would never do— you could not burn down a church and expect the world to bless your cause. Hundreds of rifles were firing now. Men and boys were cheering. Horses reared and plunged, neighing in fear. To Waddell, the clamor had an old, familiar taste.

Sam Jenks, who had finally worked his way to Waddell's side, said, "I thought there wasn't supposed to be any violence." He hadn't been this scared since Cuba.

Waddell bent from his horse. "Welcome to the chaos of battle, son."

"Manly doesn't even seem to be here—"

"It's gone beyond that now. Men are going to die today."

A block north, at the intersection of Ann Street, a horde of Red Shirts surrounded the horse-drawn fire engine of Phoenix Hose Reel Company No.1 as it turned onto Seventh. The negro crew clutched the brass handrails as if they could

not be harmed unless they let go. A dozen men grabbed the horses and held them. The others trained their rifles on the firemen and shouted obscenities. The firemen didn't reply—they hugged their machine.

Free Love Hall blazed so hot that the crowd fell back. The cool air rushed past their ears toward the suction of the fire, and the heat gusted back into their faces. Flames shot fifty feet above the roof. The pine clapboards, saturated with natural resin, burned blue and orange. Boards crackled and spit. Rafters buckled with claps like pistol shots. The flames sucked at the cool air with a sound like heavy surf. The shake roof erupted in half a dozen places, the shingles fluttering onto the heads of the mob. Some of the siding boards literally exploded, rocketing embers into the crowd. The embers arced out from the building and bloomed like fireworks. The crowd cheered each one and danced out of the way.

The fire spit out flaming splinters. Little white boys scrapped over them, ran in gleeful circles trailing plumes of smoke.

All at once a great tearing sound split the air—the joists were buckling. Waddell's horse heard it and reared up, almost tossing him off. He got the horse under control and listened: The upstairs floor was giving way.

A thousand men and boys stopped their spree and paid attention. Then they heard a great boom—as the Jonah Hoe Press crashed through.

At the intersection of Seventh and Ann, the Red Shirts backed away from the fire brigade and let them through unmolested. For two hours the brigade fought the blaze, but they didn't have a chance—Free Love Hall was already a ruin by the time they arrived. They worked under the guns of the mob, concentrating on their apparatus.

Hugh MacRae watched the firemen work. "Such discipline," he observed.

One of the Red Shirts said, "You dress those monkeys up, they are crackerjack."

Sam could not turn away—his eyes were captured by the spectacle. When at last the heat made him look away, he spied the woman reporter in the crimson Eaton jacket, grinning toward the flames, scrawling onto her notebook pages with a blind hand.

Back at Colonel Waddell's house, Bessie King fretted. Her hands needed to be doing something. Those high and mighty men who had followed the Colonel out the door had murder in their eyes. She didn't want to know where they were going, or why. "Lord, bring my boy back to this house before the reckoning," she prayed out loud as she cleaned up the kitchen and rinsed the breakfast dishes at the sink. The cold water sloshed out of the pump and splashed her apron, but she didn't notice.

The parlor carpet was soiled from boots and men's heavy shoes. She fetched the vacuum sweeper, the newest gadget the Colonel had procured for the household. She could get the carpet much cleaner by hauling it out the back porch, folding it over the bannister, and whacking it with her broom, but her back was too tired today. She rolled the mechanical sweeper over the carpet back and forth, listening to the roller brush spin and the dirt rattle up into the metal canister. When she stopped, the house was silent. She rolled the gadget back into the kitchen closet and closed the door on it.

It was a powerful lonely morning. Her boy was out on the streets somewhere. Her little girl, too—slipped out during breakfast.

She sighed and held back tears. Humming softly to keep off the heebie-jeebies, she climbed the stairs to see about Miz Gabrielle. Surely she must crave some company, too.

True Fiction and Fictitious History

At the intersection between fact and fiction, the historical novelist makes crucial decisions about "truth" and "truthfulness."

A STRANGER COMES TO TOWN—ME.

The town is Wilmington, North Carolina.

Like any stranger, I hear stories about my new town. Every community is built on stories—they define who we are, why we live in a place. Stories are the collective memory of a community, the narrative of our past, the demonstration of what we value.

Between all the brave local histories—plucky Minutemen fighting off Cornwallis' Redcoats, Confederates with fire in their bellies beating back the first Yankee wave against Fort Fisher—I hear a rumor of another kind of story—a story of race riots, murder in the streets, the breakdown of civil order, a hundred years ago.

It sounds like a classic case of racist violence: a small cadre of rich white men manipulate a lot of poor white men with guns into attacking the black community. Nobody can agree on the details, but there's one thing they all agree on: the flashpoint for the violence was a young black writer, the editor of the Daily Record, which billed itself as the first "Afro-American" daily newspaper in the country, Alex Manly. He was banished from Wilmington under a death sentence and his newspaper burned to the ground for a colorful editorial he wrote against

lynching. I seek out every book, article, dissertation, and newspaper story on the event, and the outline takes shape:

On November 10, 1898, in a thriving river town that was two-thirds black, a thousand armed white men and boys took to the streets and killed an untold number of blacks. Some they executed by firing squad. Scores of blacks and their white political allies were rounded up and put on trains out of town at bayonet point. For three days, Wilmington lay under martial law.

In the midst of the violence, after signing a "White Declaration of Independence," the vigilantes hauled the mayor and the board of alderman—which included a number of black men—into city hall at gunpoint and forced them all to resign. It is widely believed to be the only coup d'état in American history.

I wanted to write about the coup. More accurately, once I knew what I knew, I couldn't not write about it. I lay awake at night thinking about it. Every daily event seemed to relate to it. The book *Cape Fear Rising*—as yet unformed—already had a life of its own. The subject gripped my imagination, ignited my passion.

Not just because it was a case of racism run amok, though it was. Not even because it hinged on freedom of expression—though like most writers I am passionate about the right to free expression. For me the real story was the failure of democracy—the faultlines running through a prosperous and seemingly tolerant community were deep and long, and when push came to shove, the community split apart.

The book would address that moment when the social contract breaks down, all bets are off, and a progressive community with good schools, telephones, an opera house, and a well-educated citizenry turns into Beirut

So why not write the story as nonfiction?

Well, in a practical sense, the record was incomplete. Some archives had been deliberately purged of incriminating material. Others had been looted by researchers. And as with most historical events, most of what happened never got recorded at all. Or if it appeared in newspapers or memoirs, the accounts were usually self-serving, written by participants or their descendants trying to justify their actions. A nonfiction book would have had an unsatisfying, squishy center.

But I had a more important reason for turning the story into a novel—or more precisely, using the novel form to get at the truth of the event. I was concerned with motive—with the why of the violence. For that I needed access to the interior lives of the "characters." The nonfiction writer can't possibly know what goes on in the minds of his characters. He's stuck in the first person—his own point of view—even when the story seems to be told objectively. Unless, of course,

he can interview his characters, put their voices on the page—and mine were all dead.

But fiction thrives on the interior life.

Through the imaginative act, the fiction writer can enter the consciousness of another human being.

When you're dealing with actual lives, with real people who were somebody's ancestor, you'd better get it right. No matter how certain you are that your version of their interior lives is true, it's always possible that you're dead wrong. The mystery of the human personality always humbles a good writer.

The only way to guard against being dead wrong is to do thorough and imaginative research—striving for "truthfulness" of event, just as though you were setting out to write nonfiction. And even that's no guarantee.

Before I wrote a word, I spent more than a year in archives, libraries, museums, courthouses. I walked the streets of Wilmington, measuring distances—how far the mob marched, how long it took to flee their guns. I walked under the city in the secret tunnels that honeycomb the Market Street district—tunnels possibly used by the conspirators. I pored over 1897 Sanborn-Perris insurance maps, learning which buildings were brick and which wooden, where the roads and streetcar lines ran, where the cotton mills stood. I searched out tombstones in the Oakdale Cemetery.

I drove five hundred miles to the U.S. Army Ordnance Museum at Aberdeen, Md., so I could handle a Gatling gun like the one that was used by the White Supremacists. I wanted to feel the story under my hands, to smell it, to feel its weight.

I read diaries, memoirs, recipe books, letters, newspaper accounts, business ledgers, marriage and death certificates.

I wanted to learn definitively the truth of the events. My first aim was to write about the public actions of the men and women who struggled through those dark days as truthfully and accurately as I possibly could. So I wrote a long chronology of actual verifiable events and an equally long series of biographies of the principal players, detailing the things we know from the record that they actually did.

My second and more important aim—which depended on first writing truthfully—was to discover the why of such a civic failure: What were the conditions that made the city ripe for violent revolution? Was it inevitable, or could determined men and women of conscience have stopped it? What are the implications of the event for us, a hundred years later?

Who were these people? What did they hope to gain? What made them do what they did? They were not evil villains—that would make it easy to dismiss

them as monsters, aberrations. We could tell ourselves: We're not like them. We'd never do that.

But we are like them. They were mostly decent family men, deacons in their churches, good fathers and husbands, civic philanthropists. At least one was an ordained minister. Yet for a brief moment in their lives, they shot down unarmed neighbors, beat and imprisoned others, drove many more from their community.

So why did they do it?

Here the letters and memoirs provided clues. One of the ringleaders had written about his plans to solve the problem of "King Numbers"—the majority ratio of blacks to whites—by attracting white European immigrants. Another had recently lost his job as customs collector—the highest paying job in the state—to a black Republican. Another lectured on the Aryan theory of racial purity. And so on. From their business ledgers, their letters, their diaries, their memoirs, their personalities emerged.

And sometimes the archives were most illuminating when they had nothing to do with race, no direct connection to the events. So the young wife of the sixtyish lawyer who led the mob writes in her "receipt" (recipe) book, along with the ingredients for a Lady Baltimore cake, a coy poem alluding to her husband's infidelity.

In a series of letters to the editor of the local newspaper, her husband duels with a Catholic priest over whether damnation for sinners was eternal, the soul truly immortal.

A letter yields the information that one ringleader and his brother blackmailed their sister's suitor to keep him from marrying her.

Another's later memoir reveals an admiration for Mussolini, the Italian dictator.

All these are clues to the interior lives of real characters.

When they speak in the novel, they are saying out loud the sorts of things they wrote in letters or journals or memoirs. The scene is concocted to make explicit what was only implicit, but the invention happens within a very narrow range.

One last important tactic: I created some fictional characters.

Some sixty real-life people played important roles in the events of 1898—far too many for the cast of a novel. I narrowed this down to a couple dozen—and invented a few key characters, either as composites of real people, or as narrative focal points. The novel oscillates among various points of view, but it always comes back to that of Sam Jenks, the fictional reporter newly arrived in town, and his schoolteacher wife, Gray Ellen. They have access to all the white and black communities and watch events unfold with the fresh eyes of outsiders.

This mixture of fictional and real characters upset lots of people, including some of the descendants of those portrayed in the novel. But the book is called a novel for a reason: the contract between a novelist and his reader is truth. The contract between the nonfiction writer and his reader is truthfulness.

That doesn't mean the novel isn't as truthful as I could make it— only that where a thing could not be proved, or where the abstract could be made concrete, I interpreted the moment dramatically.

As it turned out, *Cape Fear Rising* was not about a Southern city in 1898. It was about every city in the world in 1998, or, for that matter, 2098. The tension of a democracy to fray apart is always with us. Built into the very idea of democracy is danger— the temptation for the few and powerful to manipulate the many and powerless. The temptation not to trust the ballot when it goes against you. In the end, the novel is a cautionary tale.

That's my version— my truth— and I'm sticking to it.

That's one way of looking at what historical novelists do when we tackle large public subjects: we are entering the truest version we can in the marketplace of stories. The reader— and the community made up of all the readers— will choose which story to live by.

Exercises

1. USING ANY SOURCES YOU NEED: Try to prove one fact beyond a shadow of a doubt. The fact should be significant enough to matter for some reason related to the writing. For example, if you are writing a family memoir, try to prove your grandfather did or did not take part in a certain World War II battle while he was in the service. Or try to prove where your mother was on a certain historically significant day. Remember, an interview relies on memory and is not in itself sufficient proof. So rather than take a person's word as proof, you need to discover service records, other witnesses, souvenirs, photographs— enough evidence that a reasonable person could agree that your "fact" is true.

2. Write a brief account of a public event that actually happened: a demonstration, a court case, a disaster, a treaty council, a crime. Be as factually accurate as you can. Next, dramatize the material in order to turn it into compelling fiction. At what point do you cross the line from nonfiction to fiction? What changes do you make in the original material (compressing time, deleting certain "characters," creating composite characters, creating scenes)? Why? What are the effects of the changes?

3. Identify a story that is part of the heritage of your hometown— how it was founded, or what some famous citizen did, or when the big fire happened, etc.

Write it as a nonfiction story, including all the significant details— and noting any contradictions among versions. Now break it down into elements— who, what they do, the setting, the consequences. What does the story tell you about the values of your community? How do the various story elements contribute to that effect?

Finding the Story

HOW THEN DOES A WRITER come up with a subject? How do you sharpen a general interest into the shape of a story?

David Bain tells this story about the genesis of *Sitting in Darkness*, a modern-day adventure story of an expedition he mounted in the Philippines, following in the footsteps of a little-known hero of a forgotten war: "It's something very strange and celestial for me. It may be laughable, but it always feels like a bolt of light out of the blue above. And I mean that quite literally.

"My idea for my book on the Philippines came one day when I was sitting in the New York Public Library reading room surrounded with all sorts of old musty books telling me about the forgotten Philippine-American War at the turn of the century. And I was planning to write a straight history thereof. And the sun moves through those high windows like spotlights and, literally- I'm not making this up- at the moment when one of those spotlights from the sun came in through one of the west windows, I had this blinding flash about a pivotal episode in 1902 in which an American hero, an American general, captured a Filipino hero and turned the tide of the war.

"And I realized in that same moment that the isolated stretch of the coast of Luzon where this had happened had not changed in eighty years, and furthermore I realized that I could go back and retrace those steps and I would have a book that would be both historical and contemporary- that would take the things that began happening with America's relationship with the Philippines at the turn of the century and bring it all the way up to the Marcos era. And that I could staircase these chapters one by one, going from the past to the present, to the past to the present, and circle around that way. And all of that came in a flash. And I still have the scrap of paper that I wrote out the chapters on."

The result was a gripping tale of adventure as well as a cautionary political parable. As so often happens in the best nonfiction, several subjects are interwoven around the main arc of the story, and the lasting value comes out of the connections. Two or three subjects together form a complex subject larger and more profound than any single subject. One important reason for this is *metaphor*:

Each element of the story reflects the other, offering insight that would otherwise be missing.

"Metaphor can be very powerful in nonfiction," Powers maintains. "Many people don't remember that."

So Bain's Philippine expedition to test the truth of Colonel Frederick Funston's heroism in capturing Filipino insurrectionist Emilio Aguinaldo becomes a metaphor for the writer's search for answers. The historical sections resound metaphorically on present foreign policy with other far-flung regimes-in Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, Vietnam.

In Terry Tempest Williams' *Refuge*, suspense over the fate of migrating birds mirrors the suspense about the future of the author and her female relatives as they come to terms with a biological legacy of cancer. And Great Salt Lake metastasizes like a giant cancer across the bird refuge, bouncing the metaphor right back. In such a feedback loop, meaning becomes charged, heated up; it picks up speed and power. One makes us understand the other in a deeper; more profound way-a way inexpressible except by metaphor.

'The perfect subject doesn't always manifest itself in a flash of inspiration. But even if it does, that's not really so remarkable. What Bain experienced in the reading room of the New York Public Library was simply a recognition. Sudden, but not different in kind from other less dramatic recognitions. Good writing-and good writing begins with the intuitive choice of the right subject-is always a matter of timing, and timing is partly a matter of luck and accident. And partly a matter of being receptive to the wisdom of luck, to the insight provided by accident.

Dave Rahm happened to be the featured performer at an air show that Annie Dillard, who had just moved to Bellingham, happened to witness. By coincidence, Great Salt Lake began its flood as Terry Tempest Williams was struggling with her mother's cancer. Both writers were alert enough to recognize the metaphorical connections that became their subjects.

We write about certain things when connections start to clarify themselves. Out of the fog of our general interest, a definite shape starts to emerge. We watch it, squinting, trying to get a better look, trying to urge it closer. Or, preoccupied with what we thought we were going to write about, we glance up from our desk as the light strikes the high window and, all at once, there it is.

The subject is always a question, often a fundamental one: What's it like to be a hobo in late twentieth-century America? What will we find in the Gulf of California? What did young Ernest Hemingway discover in Paris that was so important he returned to it all his life?

What does it mean that a man can dance an airplane through space and make us all feel better about ourselves? How will I survive my family's cancer- and

what if I don't? Find the right question, and you have a worthy subject. Ask the right question, and the answer matters.

The answer matters. That's always the right answer to the second question the writer poses at the beginning of a project: Why am I telling this? He can look the reader in the eye in every sentence and say, *Because it matters.* It matters because the writer has found his or her passion, and every detail of setting, every quoted line of an interview, every fact shows the reader why it matters in particular and right now.

Passion is contagious.

Passion is also quirky. For reasons that seem utterly whimsical, we are attracted to certain subjects and not to others. And sometimes the subject transforms itself before our eyes. We thought all along we were writing about one thing, but it turns out our subject was really something quite different. We spotted it just in time out of the corner of our eye—we spotted it, had the guts to admit we were on the wrong track, and the courage and discipline to go back and do it right.

This is very often the case with subjects that lie outside our own experience. We may have a general sense of the topic, but we need to poke around a bit, do some undirected research, even before proposing the story idea to an editor. Even then, of course, if we really knew how the story would turn out, we wouldn't have to bother with a proposal at all. It's a Catch-22: If you know how the story is going to go, you can write a very accurate proposal and be faithful to it. But that kind of story is likely to be predictable, or downright wrong, because you didn't keep an open mind.

So you actually define a subject twice: once before you write, again as you are writing it.

One way to accumulate a stock of subjects from the world beyond your own personal experience is simply to indulge your quirky interests. Buy a box of file folders. Each time a newspaper story, an item in a museum brochure or theater program, or some other nugget of information catches your interest, label a folder and save it there. Each time a related item comes your way, simply file it in the relevant folder. You may not have any conscious intention of ever writing about any of these subjects, but if your interest ever begins to coalesce, you will have a whole file of background. A headstart.

And one way to cause your interest to coalesce into a focused subject is to review those folders from time to time. What intuitive connections can you make? A news story that disappeared three years ago may surface all at once in a new place. A social issue may take on an entirely new incarnation. A certain book may wind up being banned by both the right and the left. A public figure may go away and come back again—like the seemingly immortal Richard Nixon.

In the meantime, of course, you are busy living your life, reading your files in light of what you now know that you didn't know six months ago. Howarth says, "The way the imagination seems to work is that you are constantly constructing analogies out of something familiar to you."

Student sample: Dana Sachs
from *The House on Dream Street:*
An American Woman's Life in Hanoi
(AWP Prize winner, published Spring, 2000)

GOING UP THE PATH in front of us was an one-legged man hiking with the aid of a pair of crutches. Middle-aged and dressed in formal military attire, he was moving steadily, only stopping occasionally to hand out alms to the beggars who appeared regularly at the side of the path. Although the trail was steep and treacherous, he didn't even look winded by the exertion it required. I decided I had to speak to him. Asking Son to come with me, I hurried forward to catch up.

"*A di da Phat!*" I said.

The veteran looked up and blinked at the sight of a foreigner pronouncing the Buddhist greeting. Up close, I now saw the strain the hike was taking on him. Sweat was beading the lines of his face.

"*A di da Phat!*" he responded after a moment. Then, he turned and continued walking.

We joined him. At first, he and Son discussed the weather, the crowds of pilgrims, the distances we'd all traveled to get here. Like us, he'd arrived this morning from Hanoi. His wife and daughters, he explained, were resting back at a refreshment stall, drinking tea.

Because I felt shy with my Vietnamese, I asked Son to translate my question. "Uncle," Son asked, "where were you injured?"

The veteran didn't pause in his walking, and his answer was casual, as if we'd just asked him his profession, or where he was born. "I was fighting during the American War," he said. "Down in the Central Highlands. I had my leg shot off near Pleiku."

We came to a spot where the path veered radically to the right, and required stepping up onto a large boulder. The veteran looked at the rock, searching for a spot to place the tips of his crutches. Then he decided on two little indentations in the stone, heaved himself up, and continued along the trail. Son and I pulled ourselves up and followed him.

After walking for a while in silence, the old man glanced over his shoulder toward me.

"Where do you come from, Miss?" he asked.

I considered lying, but the guy had gotten his leg blown off. The least I could do was tell the truth. "San Francisco," I said.

The old man looked at Son. "Where's that?"

"My," Son said, giving the Vietnamese word for America.

The old man stopped in his tracks, looked at me, and smiled broadly. "How interesting," he exclaimed. "I want to go there."

"Why?" I asked. I could only imagine that he wanted to visit my country in order to bomb it. By now, six or seven other pilgrims were walking beside us, listening to this conversation. All of them began to laugh.

The vet chuckled. "For business," he explained. "Everyone's rich and business is good there. Do you think it would be difficult for me to go?"

I didn't know what to say. Even with a man whose body had been mutilated by American weaponry, yet another conversation about the war was getting twisted into something entirely different. It was as if I'd braced myself to watch a movie in which the hero dies of cancer, and found myself at a comedy instead.

"Well," I finally answered, "the airplane ticket would be quite expensive."

Everyone within earshot became involved in the discussion that followed, voicing strong opinions about the current state of the U.S. economy, and whether or not it was worth the effort to travel there. By the time we reached a fork in the path, I was starting to feel that my instincts toward reconciliation would never go anywhere in Vietnam. How can you make up with people who don't believe they're still at war with you?

The old man was taking the path that led straight ahead to the top of the mountain. We were making a detour to a small shrine that sat on the hillside about halfway up. Everyone stopped and faced each other. The veteran smiled, revealing two large gold-capped teeth at the edges of his mouth. My mind went blank, unable to focus on anything but the fact that I was standing before a Vietnamese man who had been permanently disfigured because of the war my country fought there. I might have been the first American he'd ever met, the only American he'd ever meet. Suddenly I had to say it. Even if he didn't want to hear it, I had to apologize. Slowly, I raised my hands in the gesture of supplication I'd seen Vietnamese make before altars to the Buddha. "*Xin loi Bac*," I said. "Uncle, I'm sorry."

The smile disappeared from the old man's face and he looked away, scanning the line of trees that marched like soldiers down the mountain.

"*Khong sao*," he shrugged. "*Khong sao*." It doesn't matter, he said, and he waved his hand as though we were talking about a mistake I'd made years ago that he'd long since forgotten. Then, without looking at me again, he turned and continued up the trail.

I watched the veteran until he disappeared. After pretty much forgetting about the war for months, my guilt had suddenly welled up and overflowed, right there on the Perfume Mountain. It was impossible for me to imagine saying "I'm sorry" to anyone I knew in Hanoi, not because they hadn't, also, suffered from the war—all of them had—but because the war didn't play a role in my friendships with them. When I sat on the couch with Huong, or drank beer with Tung and Phai, history and geopolitics became irrelevant. At those moments, the most important thing about the war was how little it mattered.



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