



"Words for the Hour": A New Anthology of American Civil War Poetry

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"Words for the Hour" presents a readable and illuminating account of the Civil War, told through the words of poets North and South. From bathos to profound philosophical meditation and sorrow, the range of these poems illuminates the complexity of their era while also revealing the continuing power of this turning point in American history to speak to readers in the present day.

The volume is divided into three parts, each offering a different perspective on the poetry generated by the war. Part I samples the extraordinary range of poems written immediately preceding and during the war and published in popular periodicals, providing a kind of poetic newspaper account as one might have read it then?from the early days of optimistically heralded victory on both sides, through the mounting casualties and brutal deaths of the long middle years, to the war's conclusion and President Lincoln's assassination. Viewing the struggle from many different vantage points gives the reader access to the ways that people from various backgrounds experienced the trajectory of the war. Civilians and soldiers, free blacks and proponents of slavery, women and men from Massachusetts and Virginia and from recently admitted states and barely developed territories, writers with their eyes on the national political stage and those focused on personal domestic issues: these are the multiple voices of America responding to the war.

Part II includes substantial selections of poems by writers who published extensively in response to the conflict, providing more complex and comprehensive perceptions of the war. These poets include not just well-known figures such as Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, and John Greenleaf Whittier, but also African American poets George Moses Horton and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Southern poets Henry Timrod and Sarah Piatt.

Part III offers poems by two poets who did not publish during their lifetimes, but had strong imaginative responses to the conflict, thus giving a sense of the long reach of the war as a defining national experience. One of these two poets (Emily Dickinson) is now renowned while the other (Obadiah Ethelbert Baker) is first published in this volume.

"Words for the Hour" is indeed "new" among anthologies of Civil War poetry not only in its wide range of poems by popular, anonymous, and now canonical poets but also in its informational apparatus. A historical timeline listing major battles and events of the war begins the volume, and historical photographs or lithographs introduce each section of poems. The book also includes a substantial introduction, a glossary of important names and terminology relevant to understanding the poems, and biographical sketches for all the poets whose work is included.

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