
A Conversation with Richard Taylor

Richard Taylor has long been one of Kentucky's best-loved writers—he was the state's Poet Laureate in 1999—but Sue Mundy: A Novel of the Civil War, his second historical novel, posed a different kind of creative challenge. Chronicling in fiction the true story of M. Jerome Clarke, a Confederate soldier-turned-guerrilla who was dubbed "Sue Mundy" by Louisville journalist George Prentice, the book offers insight into one of the Civil War's most enigmatic figures: an innocent who becomes a murderer, a boy who somehow becomes a female legend and is held accountable for "her" crimes. In the following Q&A, he discusses the work it took to make this project see print—a thirty-year process—his understanding of Jerome Clarke's complicated psychology, and the ways that Sue Mundy is quite possibly a story not just of the Civil War, but of our times, as well.

In the acknowledgements section of *Sue Mundy* you mention that your book took nearly thirty years to see completion. What sorts of challenges did you face in the writing and research process?

Taylor: The first version of the novel was a hodgepodge of documents and narrative without a clear point of view. Some of it was first person, some of it historical documents. It just didn't work. I shelved it for years. Two years ago I was granted a sabbatical when I reconstructed it, completely rewrote it in third person, adding new material and getting rid of some old. I also had the benefit of new information, some of it supplied by some civil war buffs who had researched info that appears in no other printed sources.

Among the new sources was better access to the newspaper accounts of Sue Mundy's activities, especially George Prentice's account of them. But much of the most useful information was provided by "students" of the guerrilla war in Kentucky. They were generous in feeding me new information, mostly from military records and obscure news accounts. But part of the information was anecdotal. For example, one of my informants brought home to me that many of Sue Mundy's crimes were committed when the perpetrators were at least partially under the influence of alcohol. That fact helps explain some of the purely gratuitous violence, though it does not, of course, excuse it. When I learned of the red suits they wore, a whole new dimension of their activities came clear to me. In some ways, they must have functioned as members of some gangs in urban settings do today—violence becoming an antidote to boredom or frustration within a culture that is essentially sociopathic. Interestingly, for a week I had possession of one of the Colts that Sue Mundy was captured with. Odder still was driving past Woodburn Farm with it on the seat of my car, following the route Sue Mundy and others followed over a hundred and forty years ago. I was glad to get it off my hands when I realized, according to one authority, that its provenance was sound and that it was probably worth a quarter of a million dollars to a serious collector.

What drew you to Jerome Clarke? Do you recall the catalyst for your interest in this historical figure?

Taylor: What drew me initially to Sue Mundy was a photo that appeared in the late 70's in a pictorial history of Louisville, *Views of Louisville*, published by the *Courier Journal*. It contained the photo of Sue Mundy seated with his legs crossed. I decided then to learn everything about him I could, starting with journal articles in the Register of the KY historical Society and Filson Club Quarterlies, then moving on to memoirs and books, then military records and courts martial in the National Archives. I also talked with experts on the subject who gave me perspective and additional help.

What about the photograph so compelled you?

Taylor: I was curious to get behind the image and learn the reality of his violent life. It opened up a number of

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questions and a number of possibilities to me. In some ways, the novel, just as the introductory description of Jerome Clarke seated, is a deconstruction of the photograph. The clarity of the image belies the complexity of shadow and substance that it embodies. By itself, the photograph is inadequate to explain who this person is, what produced him, what is going on in his head. The answer to these and similar questions, I guess, is what the novel is about. My favorite professor, Guy Davenport, defined art as the replacement of indifference with attention. It was hard for me to be indifferent about that image of Sue Mundy, just as about the same time, I was arrested by the photographs of sharecroppers in James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, whose faces I painted over a period of months as oil portraits, maybe as some kind of exorcism but also partially as commemoration. Jerome Clarke, at first a boy with good prospects, deserves, in the same way, some sort of explanation about how, given his upbringing and the times, he could go so wrong. My partial response is that all of us are potentially Sue Mundys, creatures of infinite possibility who are circumscribed by the collision of our potential with the realities of our circumstances. The novel is an exploration of these questions, a replacement of indifference with attention.

Talk a bit more about the research process. How did you begin? What sources were most useful to you?

Taylor: First, I went to standard histories of the Civil War in Kentucky and followed every reference to Sue Mundy. This meant county histories, standard histories of the war, biographies of participants (such as John Hunt Morgan), even diaries and memoirs. In addition to seeking out facts, I wanted to get a flavor of the war, gathering facts about weapons, horses, uniforms, etc. One of the most interesting experiences was accompanying a group of Civil War buffs along the route that William Quantrill followed in Kentucky. We stopped at the site of skirmishes and killings. One was the remains of a farmhouse in a cornfield that belonged to man named Prior Pruitt. Our expert, named Harold Edwards, pulled out an account of Quantrill's coming to the house early in 1865. He'd knocked on Pruitt's door, the very door of the dilapidated building we were standing in front of. When Pruitt refused to open it, Quantrill shot through it, killing Pruitt (whose grave we visited a mile or so away). In the door was a single bullet hole. That bullet hole brought home the war to me in a way no book ever could.

The most useful sources were the straightforward journal articles. But the details that give it, I hope, some verisimilitude came from all the accounts I read, some of them pretty remote from Sue Mundy's life. I read everything I could find that in any way contributed to the historical context and to the language I felt would make the narrative authentic. I drew from maybe 40 or 50 sources, making up what I had to or wanted to in an effort to make it all come together.

Can you pinpoint specific ways that you were able to capture the sensibility of the times? Did these accounts give you a vocabulary, a point of view, details of daily life—or some combination?

Taylor: I can remember jotting down the slang of the day in hopes of finding a place to use it in the book. I confess to being very impressed with the density of detail and sense of place and time I found in Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain*, probably the best Civil War novel I've read, surpassing Shelby Foote's *Shiloh* and Robert Penn Warren's *Wilderness*. I tried to get that kind of credibility, realizing I would probably fall short. I used language and details from courts martial, which were as close as I could come to the truth of the experience. All of these things, even using an 1860's thesaurus, aided me in the writing of the narrative.

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Why did you choose to tackle this material as a novel rather than a straightforward history? What liberties did this genre allow you? What limitations?

Taylor: I considered writing a biography of Sue Mundy, but there were too many gaps in the material and too little analysis of his moral trajectory—the development of character that makes for good fiction. Writing a novel let me lie a little to tell the truth, as they say—at least the truth as I see it. This is another way of saying that not always having to verify what I said made the process more enjoyable. Writing fiction allowed me to apply Jerome’s experience to my own understanding of things. One of the things that moved me to take up the novel again was the loss of one of my own sons—imagining what his aspirations were and what it meant to die young.

So part of the challenge was remaining faithful to Jerome Clark’s point of view without sacrificing the larger perspective on the Civil War that his story offers.

Taylor: Though I tampered with facts, I tried very hard to adhere to what I believed was the reality of his experience. In order to convey that reality, I had to make him perhaps more aware, more sensitive than he actually was. I could not think of him, maybe any criminal, simply as a brute. Humans are intricately complex and changeable, an idea that lies at the heart of the fictional enterprise.

Speaking of this “fictional enterprise,” when writing a historical novel, how do you decide when to rely on the novelist’s tools of invention and when to adhere as closely as possible to historical accounts? Were there points in the writing when achieving both narrative urgency and historical accuracy was difficult? If so, how did you respond to this challenge?

Taylor: I used facts where they existed and tried to fill in the gaps with supposition and invention, trying to capture the spirit of the times and what I could reasonably infer from the actions of the participants. Sue Mundy’s literary tastes, his sensitivity, his moral growth and awareness (if that’s the way to describe his development as a human being) are pretty much made up. Mundy comes in the end to value life, though he cannot accept the blandishments of religion. His appetite for living is greatest just at the point at which he is captured. He is captured because he values personal loyalty (to the wounded Magruder, who has saved his life) above self-preservation. He deserves to be hanged, but not for the crimes of which he is accused. Neither side occupies the moral high ground in its methods. There is some evidence that his captors were even more morally reprehensible since their actions were calculated, his random and opportunistic. In some ways, I meant the book to be an anti-war tract, an examination of war’s dehumanization of individuals. It is also an attempt to de-romanticize war. I’m reminded of the marker at the German cemetery at El Alamein in North Africa at the end of WWII: “The price of pride is very high, paid for by the young.” Who was it who said, “War is always the failure of reason”?

Did Sue Mundy, then, become more than a historical figure for you? Was he a vessel for a larger statement about the effects of war on the young and impressionable? I notice, for instance, that you refer to him as “Sue Mundy” in your responses, which speaks more to the legend than to the boy who unwittingly inspired it.

Taylor: I’m less interested in Sue Mundy the legend than in Sue Mundy the individual and Jerome Clarke, another victim, another perpetrator in the war. In some ways Sue Mundy the legend is the creation of George D. Prentice. As mentioned, Prentice uses him for his own purposes and makes him a kind of *bete noir* of all guerrillas in Kentucky, often attributing the acts of others to him. Jerome Clarke must have been a very complex, conflicted individual, dealing with the losses he sustained: birth father and mother, adoptive father, Morgan, etc.

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The book offers some theories about why the journalist George D. Prentice perpetuated the Sue Mundy myth—chief among them that Prentice did so to goad Union leadership—but would you mind expanding on this a bit? What, precisely, was Prentice hoping to achieve? Was he in any way successful?

Taylor: Prentice was a Unionist, one of the most influential editors in the South, an acquaintance of Lincoln, much admired. Yet he deeply resented the actions of the military, as did many Kentuckians, especially the reprisals against Confederates and the draconian rule of military governor General Stephen Burbridge, and then his successor, General John Palmer. Making Sue Mundy into a woman, he thought, did much to discredit the Union authority. If his goal was to unseat Burbridge (initially), he was successful. The fact that his own sons were Confederates (one of them killed with Morgan) must have troubled him deeply, especially since his wife had associations with the South. Prentice probably was instrumental in shaping the revulsion of many loyal Kentuckians to the Union presence in Kentucky late in the war. The fact that Confederates were lauded after the war is in part owing to his discrediting the military commandants who made the federal military so unpopular in Kentucky. Though I didn't dwell much on it, Prentice, no dummy, must have been a terribly conflicted man. In his way, he was successful in discrediting the radical Republicanism of those appointed to administer the state. One of the unintended effects was to create a wellspring of Southern sentiment that carried the state into the twentieth century as Democrats and ex-Confederates, for better or worse, came to dominate the state.

In what ways is *Sue Mundy* a tale not just of Jerome Clark, but of the Civil War in general?

Taylor: Jerome's life is a microcosm of the larger war in Kentucky, the war in general. There is the same loss of innocence as Kentucky switched its allegiances from north to south as a result of the draconian policies of the Union commandants who, in effect, ruled the state during the last two years of the war. In part, Jerome's life is a movement from innocence to experience, idealism to disillusionment as he suffers the loss of his cousin Patterson and witnesses the devastating effects of war.

You mentioned before that you wanted *Sue Mundy* to address, in part, war's dehumanization of individuals. Is this a story that has some relevance in today's social and political climate?

Taylor: There is moral deterioration here just as there is in the sectarian violence in Iraq or Lebanon. The difference is that one relates to ethnicity, one almost purely to politics. Amazingly, people from opposing sides in the Civil War sat often in the same churches before and after the war. Guerrilla war means little war, the unofficial war that we are now witnessing in the Middle East, in Afghanistan, in Iraq. Sadly, the fact that the similarities are so cogent makes a sorry comment about our lack of moral growth as a species. The names and allegiances change but not the tendency toward violence as a futile means to resolve differences. Every war, as has been said, represents the failure of reason. That we should begin a new millennium with a preemptive war half a world away is a sad commentary on our present and our future.

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