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Civil War Terrorists

Lexington, KY—“In Kentucky at the end of the Civil War, we’re looking at the war on terrorism,” says Richard Taylor, author of the new historical novel *Sue Mundy*. The book chronicles in fiction the true story of M. Jerome Clarke, an eager teenager who enlists in the Confederate army and later deserts for the life and spoils of a guerrilla. Clarke is mistaken for female and dubbed “Sue Mundy” by an ambitious journalist who gave rise to a Civil War legend.

“Sue Mundy and company are early terrorists—manufacturers of fear as much as soldiers who’ve lost sight of their cause,” says Taylor. “They must have seen themselves as job-holders, not necessarily soldiers but individuals performing with the skills they had—shooting others, stealing horses, surviving.”

In fact, Clarke—AKA Sue Mundy—ran with a band of some of the era’s most notorious and dangerous guerrillas, such as Sam “One-Armed” Berry, a former schoolteacher driven to bloodlust by the death of his sister, Billy Madruger, Bill Marion, and later William Clarke Quantrill, a man Taylor describes as “a beast, in many ways, divorced from serving any higher end than his own preservation.” As the Southern cause weakened and Confederate leaders such as John Hunt Morgan succumbed to enemy fire, a number of soldiers deserted their units and opted for a different sort of lifestyle: one in which thievery, rape, and even murder were commonplace.

The novel offers vivid descriptions of the exploits of Clarke and his gang, including daring cattle raids, the kidnapping and execution of Union soldiers, and the theft of prize thoroughbreds from one of the Bluegrass State’s famed breeders. Dressed in red costumes and led—at least from the public’s perspective—by the long-locked she-devil Sue Mundy, the group members became legends in their own time, as dangerous to Confederate sympathizers as Union soldiers. Yet Sue Mundy was once a quiet boy named Jerome Clarke, and Clarke—like many of his fellow guerrillas—was once a legitimate soldier. What happened? *Sue Mundy* seeks, in part, to answer that question.

“Quantrill was probably deranged and sociopathic, as were Madruger and Marion,” Taylor says. “Berry, better educated, is more complex. These guys did not watch the news. They had little perspective beyond what immediately affected them. Nor did they, once removed from command, have much discipline or restraint.”

Understanding Clarke and his motives proves a greater challenge, one that attracted Taylor early in his research and writing. “Brutes are not very interesting, nor very credible,” he says. “Sources simply don’t give much sense of the intricacies of character attached to any of us. I tried to create a moral trajectory in Mundy’s character as he begins to question violence for the sake of revenge or simply for the sake of violence, assuming a more complex and mature view of war and its costs, both physical and moral.”

Crediting Clarke with this kind of understanding makes his descent into lawlessness that much more devastating, a point Taylor acknowledges. “Part of Clarke’s tragedy is that he had advantages and normalcy on which to build,” he says. “The point is that war alters personality, that it distorts and twists both its victims and its participants.”

“*Sue Mundy* aspires to be in the tradition of books that explore the dark side of the American psyche, something that started with Melville and Hawthorne,” Taylor adds. “Sue Mundy, in his way, is an exploration of that darkness, challenging the heroic image of war as the trying place of heroes and the triumph of right. Clarke’s life is an acknowledgement that all of us are possessed of a darker side and that life has instances of unaccountable evil in it.”

Richard Taylor is professor and Resident Creative Writer at Kentucky State University. A former poet laureate of Kentucky, Taylor has written several books, including *Bluegrass*, *Earth Bones*, and *Stone Eye*.

SUE MUNDY: A NOVEL OF THE CIVIL WAR

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