

19th Century Memoirs: An Annotated Selection

By Dan Hubbs

John D. Rockefeller (1839 –1937), estimated to be the wealthiest American of all time, was able to pay a substitute to take his place in the Civil War. He was quoted as saying: “I would rather earn 1% off 100 people’s efforts than 100% off my own efforts” and “ It is wrong to assume men of immense wealth are always happy.” His experience in 19th Century America was certainly unique, if not always as happy as he might have wished. For most people, life during this period of great change was difficult in the extreme. The memoirs listed here offer a cross section of experience as lived by everyday women and men, soldiers, sailors, laborers - and people forced into labor. Good will and righteous struggle stand side by side with prejudice and racism in our American story. It’s a story we need to know and understand, as best we can. The selection of titles recommended here will increase our knowledge and our understanding.

Twelve Years a Slave

Solomon Northup
Penguin, NY 2012

Solomon Northup, a literate, free black man, was working as a musician in Saratoga Springs, New York, when he was kidnapped and sold into slavery. His 12 years of captivity, from 1841 to 1853, form the basis of this astonishing book. The account of his capture and sale and journey to Louisiana, reads like a modern horror story, while his descriptions of the day to day humiliations and brutalities of slavery are infuriating. The movie the book is based on is a separate, and quite different, work of art, so even if you’ve seen the movie, you should read the book! Also: *His Promised Land, autobiography of John Parker, Autobiography of Frederick Douglass, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, by Harriet Jacobs and the anthology *Slave Narratives* by Library of America.

Co. Aytch: A Confederate Memoir of the Civil War

Sam R. Watkins
Touchstone, NY 2003

The author of this acclaimed memoir (quoted in Ken Burn’s Civil War) spent four years fighting in the Confederate Army. Born in Tennessee in 1839, Samuel Watkins joined the army in 1861 when “every person, almost, was eager for the war.” He fought in numerous major battles, including, Shiloh, Chattanooga, Chickamauga, Missionary Ridge and Atlanta, and faithfully recorded the grinding horror of his experience. He was one of 120 men in Company H at the start of the war, by war’s end he was one of 7 still alive. Watkin’s writing contains flashes of poetry and grim humor. Here is what the war looked like from a private on the wrong side of history. Also: *Civil War: Told by Those Who Lived it*, 4 Vol Library of America. *Memoirs*, by Ulysses S. Grant.

Two Years Before the Mast
Richard Henry Dana
Library of America, NY 2005

Dana left Harvard in 1834, due to poor health, and decided to sign on to a merchant ship as a common sailor. He sailed round Cape Horn – his description of the danger and the difficulties was praised by Herman Melville – and spent time in California as a laborer curing and treating cow hides. The diary Dana kept during his travels formed the basis of this fascinating memoir. The treatment sailors received under the sadistic Captain Thompson, inspired Dana to pursue a law degree. He spent much of his later years as a champion of sailors, laborers and runaway slaves. Also: *A Sea Captain's Wife: a True Story of Love, Race and War in the 19th Century* and *Jack Tar: Life in Nelson's Navy* and *Robert Whyte's Famine Ship Diary*.

Army Letters from an Officer's Wife, 1871-1888
Frances M. Roe
Leonaur, Oakpast 2010

Frances M. Mack was born in 1846 in Watertown, New York. She married Fayette Roe in 1871 and accompanied him to his army posts in Colorado, Utah, Montana and Wyoming. Her letters, detailing the life she lived and the events she observed, form the text of this book. Interactions with Native People, Black soldiers, the decline of the buffalo herds, gun fights in wild west towns are all chronicled. Her appreciation for the West, and the rugged life she experienced, hunting, fishing, horseback riding, illuminate the time and place. In fact, she found her return to “civilized” life difficult. She died in 1920 in Florida and is buried in Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia. Also: *Oregon Trail*, by Francis Parkman and *Tough Trip Through Paradise*, by Andrew Garcia and *Six Years With the Texas Rangers*, by James Gillett.

Lowell Offering: Writings of New England Mill Women (1840-1845)
Benita Eisler, Editor
Norton, London, New York 1997

The textile mills of Lowell Massachusetts employed thousands of young women, known as Mill Girls. Many were girls, as young as ten years old. The working day started at 5 am and lasted until 7 pm, five days a week and half a day on Saturday. (Attendance at church on Sunday was required.) Poor working conditions, low pay, strict contracts that included mandatory room and board led to strikes and unrest. But the mills also offered a modicum of financial and personal independence. The Lowell Offering was a magazine that published the writings of the workers, stories, poems, memoirs. This collection offers an insight into the hearts and minds of working women in the 1800s.

Jack London: Novels and Social Writings
Library of America, New York 1982

Before Jack Kerouac, before Jim Tully, Jack London traveled the country by hopping freight trains and living in hobo camps. This slim book, *The Road*, is his account of begging for food, hiding from railroad bulls and living on the edge of society during the depression of the 1890s. Hard living, but certainly not dull.. See also: *You Can't Win*, by Jack Black

Emily Dickinson Face to Face and "A Hedge Away"

Martha Dickinson Bianchi

New York: McNally Editions 2023

The author of this charming book was Emily Dickinson's niece and next door neighbor. Well known for her solitary life, it's a wonderful surprise to hear of Emily's skill as a baker and gardener and to hear of the baked goods and bouquets and notes she delivered on a regular basis to her brother's family next door. Martha's love and admiration for her indulgent Aunt Emily shine forth in her reminiscences. Also *A Backward Glance*, by Edith Wharton and *Diary From Dixie*, by Mary Boykin Chestnut and *Specimen Days*, by Walt Whitman.

Cruise of the Cachalot: Around the World After Sperm Whales

Frank Bullen

Narrative Press, Santa Barbara 2001

Englishman Bullen first went to sea at age 12, in 1869. He traveled the world as a cabin boy, common sailor and first mate until 1883, when he began working for the British Meteorological Office in London. Published in 1897, *The Cruise of the Cachalot* is his detailed account of the difficult, dangerous life on a whale ship. In his later years he wrote and lectured in an effort to improve the working conditions on sailing ships. See also: *Loss of the Ship Essex, Sunk by a Whale*, and *Moby Dick*.

Black Elk Speaks

U of Nebraska Press, Lincoln 2014

Black Elk, a Medicine Man of the Oglala Lakota people, was a second cousin of the famous warrior, Crazy Horse. Black Elk fought at Little Big Horn and was present at the Wounded Knee massacre. Black Elk's son translated his father's autobiographical account into English and Nebraska Poet Laureate John G. Niehardt wrote it all down. See also, *The Sixth Grandfather* for an alternate view of Black Elk's translation and intentions. Also *Narrative of My Captivity Among the Sioux Indians*, by Fanny Kelly.

Through "Poverty's Vale", A Hardscrabble Boyhood in Upstate New York, 1832-1862

Henry Conklin

Syracuse University Press, Syracuse 1974

Subsistence living in Schoharie County, New York, in the 1800s, meant making your own clothes, growing your own food, building your own home, etc. Yet the author tells the story of his family's struggles and successes as the happiest time of his life. His moving and insightful account of frontier life ends with Conklin leaving his wife and children to head off and fight in the Civil War.