Bulletins from Immortality

Reviewed by Stephanie E. Schlaifer

WHITE HEAT: The Friendship of Emily Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson.
By Brenda Wineapple. Knopf. 416 pp. $27.95

It was Emily Dickinson who initiated the correspondence, in 1862, sending Thomas Wentworth Higginson four poems and a brief query, "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?" In *White Heat,* Brenda Wineapple explores the quarter-century relationship of Dickinson, the prolific and famously eccentric poet, and Higginson, a minister, political activist, and gentleman-of-all-trades. The book, Wineapple declares, is neither biography nor literary criticism, but an effort "to throw a small, considered beam onto the lifework of these two unusual, seemingly incompatible friends."

Wineapple illuminates the oft-neglected life of Higginson (1823–1911), who served during the Civil War as a colonel in the first Union regiment composed entirely of former slaves, was an avid contributor to *The Atlantic Monthly* (which published his article of advice to writers, "Letter to a Young Contributor," prompting Dickinson's first letter), and oversaw the posthumous publication of Dickinson's poems. But a greater portion of the book is devoted to Dickinson (1830–86), known as much for her reclusive behavior and her penchant for all-white garb as for her pithy verse with its signature long dashes and hymnal rhyme and meter. About her, there will likely always be more questions than answers.

Gentleman-of-all-trades Thomas Wentworth Higginson and poet Emily Dickinson corresponded for 25 years, but met in person only twice.

Though they both lived in New England, the pair met only twice during their 25-year correspondence. The first meeting, in 1870, evidently left Higginson so drained that he confessed to his disapproving wife, "I am glad not to live near her." They had been discussing poetry when Dickinson declared, "If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. . . . Is there any other way."

Dickinson pressed Higginson many times to visit her again after a second meeting three years later, but he acquiesced only at her passing, when he attended her funeral. He once wrote to her, "I have the greatest desire to see you, always feeling that if I could once take you by the hand I might be something to you; but till then you only enshroud yourself in this fiery mist & I cannot reach you, but only rejoice in the rare sparkles of light."

Without explanation, Wineapple gives us only brief excerpts from the two's epistolary exchange, and this is a disappointment. Most of Higginson's letters to Dickinson were destroyed or lost. But many of Dickinson's letters survive. (What is most remarkable about them is how similar the prose is to her poems—she seems not to have been able to keep from expressing herself in meter and rhyme.) Still, through the bits of correspondence we are afforded, Wineapple shows us a central conceit of this complicated relationship: Dickinson often presented herself as pupil to Higginson's master or "preceptor"—a flirtatious ruse they both seemed tacitly to acknowledge and enjoy. If Dickinson habitually ignored Higginson's *suggestions* for her verse, he certainly influenced her. Wineapple includes a number of poems clearly prompted by essays, stories, and poems Higginson was publishing.

Dickinson's impassioned exchanges were not restricted to Higginson, and the book is most

engaging when exploring the handful of other close relationships Dickinson maintained—with her sister Lavinia (Vinnie), the exuberant writer Helen Hunt Jackson, and her sister-in-law Sue, the only person with whom Dickinson shared more of her poems than Higginson. Each of her carefully chosen companions served a distinct function in her life and after.

Dickinson instructed Vinnie to burn her papers upon her death, which she did. Emily evidently had said nothing about her poems, which were kept separately from the papers. Upon discovering these, Vinnie, Higginson, and the devil-may-care socialite and writer Mabel Loomis Todd set about publishing Dickinson's poems at last. It appears that Todd was responsible for the transcription of Dickinson's poems and the unforgivable liberties taken in editing them.

Todd is also remembered for her not-so-clandestine affair with Austin Dickinson, Emily's brother. Most of the book's true heat derives from the account of this affair—a juicy respite from *White Heat*'s more serious literary thrust—one I admit I enjoyed.

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CONTEMPORARY AFFAIRS

Victims of War

Reviewed by Hew Strachan

TARGETING CIVILIANS IN WAR.

By Alexander B. Downes. Cornell Univ. Press. 315 pp. $29.95

During the 20th century, Alexander B. Downes tells us, between 43 and 54 million noncombatants died as a result of war. However shocking, it is a statement without precision. As he acknowledges, we have no firm bead on the civilian death toll in Iraq, let alone in the many conflicts of sub-Saharan Africa. The military losses of World War I are known to the nearest million, the civilian losses not even to so general an estimate. And how are we to define a combatant? Downes decides to treat the terms "noncombatant" and "civilian" interchangeably, though a few military personnel, such as doctors, are noncombatants, and many civilians are combatants.

Neither point contradicts the basic premise of Downes's book, that civilians have been targeted in modern interstate wars, and that this has been a problem of increasing international concern. Downes, a political scientist at Duke, argues that the pressure to target civilians has arisen in two types of war: those of territorial annexation, in which enemy civilians are displaced or killed to make way for settlers, and wars of attrition, in which desperation drives even (or particularly) democracies to target civilians in order to coerce the enemy to surrender. In Downes's view, the types of regime engaged in the war are not significant, nor is either military culture or the racial identity of the enemy. Downes is a reductionist, anxious to seek a single set of explanations for a complex phenomenon.

> Desperation drives even democracies to target civilians in order to coerce the enemy to surrender.

He develops four principal case studies: the blockade of Germany in World War I, the strategic bombing of Japan (but not of Germany) in World War II, the conflict of 1947–49 associated with the founding of Israel, and the South African War of 1899–1902. In the latter conflict, the British decision to collect Boer families in "concentration" camps was less innovative than first appearances suggest. Though colonial annexation relied on assimilation more than ethnic cleansing, these wars still targeted the indigenous populations, because these populations sustained their warriors in the field. When the British invaded Zululand in 1879, they destroyed its agricultural base and sacked its capital, Ulundi: Women and children were not exempt from the consequences of that offensive, though Downes appears to believe they were.

The legacy of colonial warfare is an important strand in the argument about the origins of 20th-century "total war." The British again waged economic warfare when they blockaded the Central