

Sullivan County Sketches by Alex Schippe

There is a bustling wilderness and a rich history to Sullivan County, New York that excites the realm of American Literature through the work of Stephen Crane. Crane is known for the contrast between his characters' perception of the world and reality, but the stark and grim realism that characterizes Crane's most popular works is absent within a collection of lighthearted short stories anthologized as the Sullivan County Sketches. The sketches are based off an 1891 camping trip with three friends into the wilderness of "the Hartwood Club area Northwest of Port Jervis in Sullivan County, New York,"¹ and within the domain of the Hudson River Valley. Crane drew inspiration from the varying homes he had during his short lifetime, but because it was only his experience within the Hudson River Valley that brought out the humorist within him, it is worth exploring. His most memorable characters are self-conscious youths that straddle the line between dangerous brashness and guilty cowardice. Whereas in the Sullivan County Sketches this leads his characters to comical tomfoolery, in his better known works it leads to tragedy.

Stephen Crane's first novel, Maggie: a Girl of the Streets, was written "while alternating bohemian life and explorations of the Bowery slums with visits to genteel relatives in the country near Port Jervis, NY"² and published in 1893 by Crane himself. The darker elements he experienced in his urban adventures ultimately won over the ideal nature of his rural retreat, unfortunately for Maggie Johnson: "The ugly images just prior to her suicide effectively contrast with earlier, more fanciful scenes of the ideal life she had yearned for."³ Crane's most famous

¹ Wertheim, S (1997). *A Stephen Crane Encyclopedia*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, pg. 326.

² Crane, Stephen. (2008). In *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Retrieved October 22, 2008, from Encyclopedia Britannica Online: <http://search.eb.com/eb/article-1600>.

³ Gullason, T (1961). Thematic Patterns in Stephen Crane's Early Novels. *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*. 16, 61.

work, The Red Badge of Courage, shares the explosive conflict between ideals and realities⁴ that led to the tragic suicide of Maggie. The protagonist of this later work, it was published two years later, in 1895, survives his ordeal.

The Red Badge of Courage is extraordinary for the realism Crane infused in it despite not being born until after the American Civil War was over. The titular Red Badge of Courage refers to a bloody wound that proved, in Crane's novel, that you did not run away from battle. It is desirable by the main character because of his "ideals of Greek like courage and yearn for battle."⁵ Henry Fleming is the doe-eyed hero who confronts the ugly falsehood of his naivety with a penchant for the macabre. He works his way through the brutality and horrors of war to achieve "a dubious victory over his illusions."⁶ Maggie and Henry are both young people going through a rite of passage into maturity; one succeeds and one does not, but the cruelty intrinsic to their worlds is the most impressionable. Maggie: a Girl on the Streets and The Red Badge of Courage are both "impressionistic studies of elemental fear, the one as shame, the other as failure of courage in action... To Crane, Maggie Johnson and Henry Fleming are elemental woman and man in the first moment of meeting with death."⁷ In contrast to these two important, albeit grim novels, the Sullivan County Sketches have a welcome comedic edge to them.

Crane explores familiar themes in these lighthearted short stories while his characters joyfully explore the Hudson River Valley. He moved in with his brother, William Howe Crane, in 1891 at his home in Sullivan County where he would focus on his writing after a summer camping trip. William Howe, or "Judge Crane" as he became known, was president of the Hartwood Club - the resort encompassing the wilderness that his younger brother and his three

⁴ Ibid, 65.

⁵ Ibid, 61.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Spiller, R (1949). *The Literary History of the United States*. 2, pg. 1,022.

friends explored.⁸ The Hartwood Club of today is a small hamlet on the south town line of Forestburgh, New York.⁹

When Crane died in 1900, at the young age of 28, only some of these stories had been published individually in various periodicals. They received frequent attention throughout 1892 in “The New York Tribune” and the “Cosmopolitan” and were the first of his fiction work for which he was paid.¹⁰ Short stories such as “Four Men in a Cave,” “The Octopush,” and “The Black Dog” were an important source of income for Crane while he was revising his first novel, Maggie: a Girl of the Streets. “Four Men in a Cave” is a pivotal story in what became known as The Sullivan County Sketches because it introduced the bumbling and loveable characters that, characteristic of all of Crane’s heroes, fall headfirst into trouble.

The tall man, the pudgy man, the little man, and the quiet man enter Crane’s literature unnamed and with a blind lust for adventure that led Maggie Johnson to the hard streets of New York City and Henry Fleming to the violent battlefields of the Civil War. Instead of war or prostitution, the little man suggests to his companions that they explore a dark and dubious cave: “We can tell a great tale when we get back to the city if we investigate this thing,” said he, in conclusion. They were won.”¹¹ After the four men tumble down the cave in a scene reminiscent of the “Three Stooges,” they come face to face with an old hermit paired ominously with a stone altar that states simply enough, “It’s your ante.” Disoriented by the fall and confused by their setting they hesitate. The old hermit impresses on them very real danger and unexpected danger true to the form of Crane’s stories, comedy or tragedy: “It’s your ante!” With a panther-like

⁸ Wertheim, Stanley, and Paul Sorrentino. The Crane Log: A Documentary Life of Stephen Crane. New York City: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1994, pg. xxvi.

⁹ Town of Forestburgh Planning Board. (2007). *Town of Forestburgh Comprehensive Plan* (pg. 12). Forestburgh.

¹⁰ Wertheim, Stanley, and Paul Sorrentino. The Crane Log: A Documentary Life of Stephen Crane. New York City: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1994, pg. 71-82.

¹¹ Crane, S (2003). Four Men in a Cave. Retrieved December 13, 2008, from Read Book Online Web site: <http://www.readbookonline.net/readOnline/1503/>

motion he drew a long, thin knife and advanced, stooping. Two cadaverous hounds came from nowhere, and, scowling and growling, made desperate feints at the little man's legs."

And so, at the behest of the knife-wielding, hound flanked old hermit, he and the little man...play poker? Yes, yes they do. And such a silly twist of fate is typical of the Sullivan County Sketches that explore characteristic Crane themes with uncharacteristic Crane mirth. After the hermit wins all the little man's money he erupts in anger and the four of them flee the cave. What ensues is an ironic reflection of their original purpose: "'Oh, well,' he said, 'we can tell a great tale when we get back to the city after having investigated this thing.' 'Go to the devil,' replied the little man." The end of "Four Men in a Cave" signified the beginning of Crane's work with the tall, pudgy, little, and quiet men. The popularity of these humorous stories went beyond supporting Crane while he was establishing himself as an important contemporary novelist.

Nearly 50 years after his death the first collections of these works began appearing. The Sullivan County Sketches of Stephen Crane was edited and compiled by Melvin Schoberlin in 1949. It consists of ten of the stories, three of which appeared in print for the first time and all but "Killing his Bear" featured the four men. This collection contained "Four Men in a Cave," "The Octopush," "A Ghoul's Accountant," "The Black Dog," "Killing his Bear," "An Explosion of Seven Babies," "A Tent in Agony," "The Cry of Huckleberry Pudding," "The Holler Tree," and "The Mesmeric Mountain." In 1968, R.W. Stallman published "Stephen Crane: Sullivan County Tales and Sketches" and added seven stories to Schoberlin's ten, one of which, "Across the Covered Pit," takes place in Kentucky and was mistakenly included. The six that do take place in Sullivan County are "The Last of the Mohicans," "Hunting Wild Hogs," "The Last

Panther,” “Sullivan County Bears,” “The Way in Sullivan County,” and “Bear and Panther.”¹²

The added stories do not contain the four men and focus less on humorous misadventures and more on life in the wilderness and community of Sullivan County. More than a hundred years after his death, the author and the Hudson River Valley are still connected through a museum that commemorates his life.

The Sullivan County Museum located in Hurleyville, New York has a thorough exhibit devoted to Stephen Crane’s life, work, and interaction with Sullivan County. What is most prominent in the exhibit is the extensive collection of first or second editions of Crane’s varied works, including Maggie: a Girl of the Streets, Red Badge of Courage, and Sullivan County Sketches. Also available are pictures of Crane, his wife, his homes, and primary documents such as his death record and the official Florida Funeral Director’s and Embalmer’s Association document of the sinking of the Commodore. The Commodore was a naval vessel that sank during Crane’s service as a war correspondent during the Spanish American war and led to him being temporarily stranded on the seas, inspiring his celebrated and frequently anthologized short story of the experience, “The Open Boat.”

“A Short Story of Stephen Crane’s Life in Sullivan County” is a five minute video about the author and his relationship to the Sullivan County. It was produced by the Sullivan County Historical Society and the Sullivan County Community College. There is a television alongside the exhibit ready to play the video to interested patrons. They have available for purchase various books by and about Stephen Crane.

The endurance of Crane’s work and the significance of his life are implicit in the canonization of his novels, the anthologizing of his short stories, and the commemoration of his life in Sullivan County Museum. His best known work, The Red Badge of Courage, is a bloody

¹² Wertheim, S (1997). *A Stephen Crane Encyclopedia*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, pg. 326-327.

contrast to his lighthearted short stories of companions and wilderness in Sullivan County. Although they may be sillier tales, all of Crane's work explore the author's obsession with the danger of underestimating the unknown and what the consequences for discovering too late that "the unknown was indeed to be feared."¹³ The Hudson River Valley brought out the humorist in him that none of his other homes could and the Sullivan County Museum commemorates that. Stephen Crane once described his Sullivan County Stories in a letter to Copeland and Day as "little grotesque tales of the woods which I wrote when I was clever."¹⁴ They offer a look into the author that became well known in his time, and canonized after, for depicting the pains of human isolation and the power of reconnecting with a community

Read a few of the Sullivan County Sketches to get a sense of Crane's Sullivan County milieu:

- [The Mesmeric Mountain](#) from Online Literature
- [Four Men in a Cave](#) from Online Literature
- [Killing his Bear](#) from Horror Masters
- [A Ghoul's Encounter](#) from Horror Masters
- [The Black Dog](#) from Horror Masters
- [The Octopush](#) from Horror Masters

¹³ Wolford, C (1992). *Stephen Crane: a Study of the Short Fiction*. Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, pg. 11.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 326.

