Winslow Homer’s Prisoners from the Front

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“That writer who shall achieve the task of combining the truth of sober narrative with the individuality and dramatic power of fiction, will realize the idea of a true popular history.”

George Perkins Marsh, The American Historical School (1847)

The criticism that greeted Winslow Homer’s Prisoners from the Front (Figure 1) on the occasion of its first exhibition at the National Academy of Design in New York in 1866, in addition to being almost universally favorable—“it is the figure picture of the exhibition,” wrote The Round Table critic—was in virtually unanimous agreement in its interpretation. The critic of the New York Tribune wrote: “It is not easy to say how the two sides in our late war could have been better epitomized than in this group of three Southern prisoners brought up before a Northern officer. The leaders are contrasted, not merely without exaggeration, but one may almost say, with judicial impartiality.”1 A writer in The Nation said: “In the greater matters of meaning and expression it is hardly to be bettered. These are real men—the officer with the star on his shoulder, the two soldiers with shouldered muskets, and the three prisoners. The Southern officer and the Northern officer are well contrasted, representing very accurately the widely differing classes to which they belong.”2 The New York Evening Post critic (“Sordello”) wrote: “There is a force in the rendering of character, and a happy selection of representative and at the same time local types of men, in Mr. Homer’s picture, which distinguish it as the most valuable and comprehensive art work that has been painted to express some of the most vital facts of our war. The more we consider Mr. Homer’s very positive work the more suggestive it is. On one side the hard, firm-faced New England man, without bluster, and with the dignity of a life animated by principle, confronting the audacious, reckless, impudent young Virginian, capable of heroism, because capable of impulse, but incapable of endurance because too ardent to be patient; next to him the poor, bewildered old man, perhaps a spy, with his furtive look, and scarcely able to realize the new order of things about to sweep away the associations of his life; back of him ‘the poor white,’ stupid, stolid, helpless, yielding to the magnetism of superior natures and incapable of resisting authority.”3 The Round Table critic said: “It expresses, in a graphic and vital manner, the conditions of character North and South during the war.”4 And, finally, the editor of Harper’s New Monthly Magazine wrote: “A group of rebel prisoners confront a young Union general, who questions them. The central figure of the group is a young South Carolinian of gentle breeding and graceful aspect, whose fair hair flows backward in a heavy sweep, and who stands, in his rusty gray uniform, erect and defiant, without insolence, a truly chivalric and manly figure. Next to him, on the

1. “About ‘Figure Pictures’ at the Academy,” 3 (1866) p. 295.
2. July 4, 1866.
3. 2 (May 10, 1866) p. 603.
4. April 28, 1866.
right, is an old man, and behind him the very antipodal figure of the youth in front—a ‘corn-cracker’—rough, uncouth, shambling, the type of those who have been true victims of the war and of the slavery that led to it. At the left of the young Carolinian is a Union soldier—one of the Yankees, whose face shows why the Yankees won, it is so cool and clear and steady. Opposite this group stands the officer with sheathed sword. His composed, lithe, and alert figure, and a certain grave and cheerful confidence of face, with an air of reserved and tranquil power, are contrasted with the subdued eagerness of the foremost prisoner. The men are both young; they both understand each other. They may be easily taken as types, and, without effort, final victory is read in the aspect of the blue-coated soldier.”

These comments vary in the amount of information or mere conjecture they supply and in the degree of patriotic fervor they display; but they all dwell, as the Nation writer put it, on the painting’s “greater matters of meaning and expression,” and, more specifically, on an admiration and evaluation of the psychological interaction between its inhabitants and their serviceability as sociological “types” that “epitomized” the fundamental issues of the American Civil War. This reading of the painting by Homer’s contemporary critics as essentially analytical, synoptic, and even symbolic is one that recent students of his art, such as Charles H. Caffin, Lloyd Goodrich, and Julian Grossman, have also made; all of them would agree with the latter’s assessment that the painting “is nothing short of a pictorial synopsis of the entire war.”

One can hardly quarrel with this interpretation, for that the painting discourses upon its subject in these terms is unquestionably the source of its greatness, the quality that makes it as timeless legible and appealing in our day as it was in its own? It is, moreover, a remarkable measure of Homer’s genius that in this, his first important painting, he alone among the painters of the Civil War was able to create so summary an image of it, and more remarkable still that he did so in ways that perfectly suited its character. For it was a war, as its participants and contemporary observers were fully aware, unlike previous ones and not amenable, therefore, to inherited rules and strategies, whether military or artistic. As it was not fought according to inherited modes of military conduct, so neither could it be properly represented by the inherited conventions of military art—conventions which the Napoleonic wars of the earlier nineteenth century supplied in familiar abundance. For instance, Colonel Theodore Lyman, a particularly cultivated commentator on the war, which he observed as an aide attached to General Meade’s staff (we shall encounter him again presently in his connection with the subject of Prisoners from the Front), wrote, “Your typical ‘great white plain,’ with long lines advancing and manoeuvring, led on by generals in cocked hats and by bands of music, exist not for us,” and he found the resemblances he occasionally noticed to conventional representations of warfare unusual and incongruous; he was struck by “a great crowd of a Staff (who never can be made to ride, except in the higglety-pigglety style in which ‘Napoleon et ses Maréchaux’ are always represented in common engravings),” and he found it “curious” that a scene of combat “reminded me of one of those stiff but faithful engravings of Napoleon’s battles that one sees in European collections.”

Surely Homer was aware of this artistic type. There were copious examples of it, and, as Nadar’s satire of the battle paintings in the 1861 Salon indicates, it was still a flourishing genre in the decade in which Homer painted Prisoners from the Front. John La Farge, in recollecting his and Homer’s artistic beginnings, presumably in the 1860s, spoke of their reliance on prints, “especially the very wonderful lithographs, which gave us the synopsis of a great deal of

6. Julian Grossman, Echo of a Distant Drum: Winslow Homer and the Civil War (New York, 1974) p. 117. Charles H. Caffin, American Masters of Painting (New York, 1913) p. 75: “The painter has felt beyond the limits of the episode itself the profound significance of the struggle in which this was but an eddy, and in the generalization of his theme has imparted to it the character of a type.” Lloyd Goodrich, Winslow Homer (New York, 1944) p. 21: “The contrast between the confident, well-groomed Northern officer and his shabby, defiant Southern counterpart, the pitiable state of the other prisoners, the fine delineation of character in the bedraggled old man, the freedom from false heroics or vindictiveness, make this a moving symbol of victory tempered with sympathy for the vanquished.”
7. One contemporary writer (The Independent, April 26, 1866) spoke of it as Homer’s “truly Homeric reminiscence of the war.”
European art," and it is not improbable that this "synopsis" included examples of military art. In whatever way or degree he had access to it, Homer was clearly familiar with its ingredients, as several of his early war illustrations indicate. But in his later work, particularly in his paintings, and above all in *Prisoners from the Front*, every trace of this mode has disappeared. This may have been because the disparity between pictorial prototype and reality was beyond reconciliation—certainly the rich photographic record of the Civil War suggests that conventional martial displays or heroics (and heroes, too) were rather the exception than the rule—or it may have resulted from an understanding, deepening to great profundity during its course, of the special and novel character of the war


12. For example, the wood engravings *The War for the Union, 1862—A Cavalry Charge*, or *The War for the Union, 1862—A Bayonet Charge*, *Harpers Weekly*, July 5, July 12, 1862. Also, the prominent French military painters Alphonse de Neuville (1835-85) and Étienne Berne-Bellecour (1838-1910) were Homer’s close contemporaries; he shared their "devotion to documentation": Frank A. Trapp, in Christopher Forbes and Margaret Kelly, *War à la Mode: Military Pictures by Meissonier, Detaille, De Neuville and Berne-Bellecour*, exhibition catalogue (Amherst College, n.d.) p. 8.

13. "It will not escape the notice of the observer who studies the war drawings made by Homer that he does not choose for his motives, as a rule, the customary battle scenes, with long lines of troops advancing or retreating, clouds of gun-powder smoke, heroic officers waving their swords and calling upon their men to 'Come on!'—and all the rest of the stock material of the School of Versailles": William Howe Downes, *The Life and Works of Winslow Homer* (New York, 1911) p. 42.
Marsh set forth in his *American Historical School* (1847): “To emphasize what was best in their tradition and national character Americans need a new kind of history,” Marsh wrote, “one which would explain peculiarly American institutions. European historians dealt with the pomp and circumstance of armies and aristocracies, remote and meaningless to Americans. History for citizens of a republic should concentrate on the common man.”

This is simply a sketch of what has been and may be said about the broadest and deepest meanings of *Prisoners from the Front*. Clearly its “greater matters of meaning and expression” have been, and continue to be, its most attractive and stimulating ones, and perhaps its most significant. Yet at the time the painting was first exhibited, and sporadically since then, another more specific aspect of its content was recognized. As the *Harper’s* editorial writer said at the conclusion of his remarks on the painting, with an indirectness that for some reason accompanies most such references, “It will not diminish the interest of the picture if the spectator should see in the young Union officer General Barlow.” Far from diminishing, it should excite one’s interest in the picture to know the identity of its chief figure. But it has not stimulated the writers of the major recent monographic literature on Homer sufficiently even to mention, much less to dwell upon it. If this is

and the appropriate means for depicting it. Homer’s painting made sense, as no other painted image did in the same degree, of the fundamental issues of that conflict. It did so because he discarded the conventional subjects of battle paintings or modes of heroic typification for a prosaic encounter between two (so far as most of his critics were concerned) anonymous figures, and because he framed and explained his subject by devices of psychological and sociological analysis that are counterparts in their modernity to the modernity of the subject they were used to describe and thus peculiarly fitted to its elucidation. Contemporary critics did not use these terms, of course, but they repeatedly commented both upon the psychological relations between the two officers, and the regional and social differences which they so clearly exemplified.

*Prisoners from the Front* is in this sense a particularly modern form of history painting. It is also a particularly American one, for it is constructed almost as though Homer were following American historiographical prescriptions such as those George Perkins Marsh described in his *American Historical School* (1847):

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because of some lingering doubt, it can easily be dispelled, for there is absolutely no question that the Union officer is in fact Brigadier General Francis Channing Barlow (1834–96). Not only does he resemble contemporary photographic portraits of Barlow so closely as to admit of no reasonable doubt (Figure 2), but Homer’s depiction accords precisely with written descriptions of him as well. For example, Colonel Theodore Lyman, who happened to be Barlow’s classmate at Harvard (Class of 1855), told of his first encounter with Barlow in the army: “As we stood under a big cherry tree, a strange figure approached; he looked like a highly independent mounted newsboy; he was attired in a flannel checked shirt; a threadbare pair of trousers, and an old blue képi; from his waist hung a big cavalry sabre. . . . It was General Barlow.” In Prisoners from the Front, Barlow’s attire is considerably more correct than that described by Lyman, but it still reveals a carelessness that was evidently one of his striking characteristics: Lyman later referred to his “costume d’été—checked shirt and old blue trousers,” and it is just this costume that he is wearing in a photograph showing him with General Winfield Scott Hancock, commander of the 2nd Corps, Army of the Potomac, and Generals John Gibbon and David Birney (Figure 3). Another conspicuous article of Barlow’s attire, recorded in this photograph, mentioned by Lyman, and faithfully recorded by Homer, is the big (Lyman also called it “huge”) cavalry saber that Barlow wore, although he was an infantry and not a cavalry officer; a stern disciplinarian, he liked it because, as Lyman reported, “when he hits a straggler he wants to hurt him.”

(Metropolitan Museum, 1939) pp. 146, 149. Downes (The Life, p. 56) merely quotes John La Farge’s description of “the painting of the prisoners at the front when General Barlow received the surrender of the Confederates,” and adds no more.


21. Ibid., p. 189. Barlow’s oddities were not confined to his dress. Lyman at one time (letter of June 13, 1864, p. 158) “found that eccentric officer divested of his coat and seated in a cherry tree,” and at another (letter of July 7, 1864, p. 186) “paid a visit to Brigadier-General Barlow, who, as the day was hot, was lying in his tent, neatly attired in his shirt and drawers, and listening to his band, that was playing without. With a quaint hospitality he sought me to ‘take off my trousers and make myself at home,’ which I did avail of no further than to sit down.”

22. Ibid., p. 189. Lyman wrote elsewhere, describing the marching of Barlow’s troops, which he admired, that it was “a result due in part to the good spirit of the men, and in part to the terror in which stragglers stood of General Barlow”: “Operations of the Army of the Potomac, June 5–15, 1864,” Papers of the Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, V (Boston, 1906) p. 20. While Barlow was the Union (or Republican) candidate for Secretary of State in New York in 1865 the opposition press told stories “of how he permitted his men who fell out of line from exhaustion on the march from the Wilderness to be cruelly and wantonly shot”: Homer A. Stebbins, A Political History of the State of New York; 1865–1869 (New York, 1913) pp. 69–70. Despite his severity, and despite his casualness of manner and dress, Barlow was meticulously attentive to his men; as Henry Lee Higginson reported, “He lives with his division, goes to a piece of work or to a fight with them—sees that they have nice clean uniform camps, that they are well cared for, that they are well placed and advantageously moved in a fight. In short he minds his work thor’ly”: Bliss Perry, Life and Letters of Henry Lee Higginson (Boston, 1921) p. 224.
Barlow’s youthfulness was a matter of physique as well as physiognomy: Lyman quoted the observation of a visiting French officer that Barlow “a la figure d’un gamin de Paris,” and he was also described as having “a slight, almost delicate form, yet as closely knit as that of a deer.”

Homer’s depiction, or, more truly, his characterization of Barlow is obviously accurate in the highest degree. And it is not confined to Barlow’s appearance or mannerisms of dress but permeates the painting. Barlow wears the regulation uniform, and, on his shoulders, the single star of a Brigadier General in the United States Army. The Union soldiers are also dressed in regulation uniform (Figure 4), even to their shoes (Figure 5). The Confederate prisoners, too, wear what was, by the end of the war, their usual, though hardly regulation, dress (Figure 6). The escort at the right carries a white flag with a red cloverleaf. This was the insignia of the 1st Division of the 2nd Corps (Figure 7), of which Barlow was in command. The Union soldier in the center wears, according to regulation, the same insignia on his cap, beneath which is the number of his regiment, 61, for the 61st New York Volunteers, one of the units comprising the 1st Division of the 2nd Corps. The Confederate officer also wears clearly legible, though not identifiable, insignia on his right sleeve.

Homer obviously took great pains to include these details and to make them both correct and coherent. He must have done this for some purpose, for he could easily have dispensed with them. One purpose that comes immediately to mind, surely, was to represent some specific incident in the war involving General Barlow and the 2nd Corps.

The possibility that Homer depicted a particular incident in *Prisoners from the Front* has never seriously been

25. However, in many of his paintings and prints of the 1860s Homer was unusually attentive to modes of dress, to the point even of a resemblance to fashion plates. This is particularly true of works like *Croquet* (1866) (Art Institute of Chicago), which is very like a fashion plate of the same year and same subject (Godey’s Lady’s Book, 72 [March 1866] following p. 292), *Initials* (1864), *Long Branch* (1869), or, to bring it closer home, of a military subject such as *Officers at Camp Benton, Maryland* (about 1861). For a parallel phenomenon among Homer’s French contemporaries, Mark W. Roskill, “Early Impressionism and the Fashion Print,” *Burlington Magazine*, 112 (June 1970) pp. 391–395.
entertained. Yet Henry Tuckerman, in his *Book of the Artists*, published the year after the painting was first exhibited and therefore presumably speaking with some authority, said it was an “actual scene,” and Homer’s friend in the 1860s, John La Farge, implied that it had a specific subject when at the end of his life he described it as “the painting of the prisoners at the front when General Barlow received the surrender of the Confederates.” (He implied further, in mentioning Barlow, that his presence in the picture is neither gratuitous nor incidental to its meaning.) Homer himself lent indirect support to the possibility of actuality. When he showed his work to James E. Kelly in the early 1870s, among which was at least one Civil War drawing (of Lincoln and Grant at City Point), Kelly reported that “he had a story to tell of each.” And Homer described an 1887 watercolor, *Two Federal Scouts*, as “drawn from life, when in advance of the Army on its last campaign, March 29th, 1865.” More generally, all of his Civil War work carries the flavor and conviction of actuality.

Francis Channing Barlow’s military career was a brilliant one. Although not a professional soldier—he was a lawyer by training—he rose from the rank of private, at which he elected to enlist at the beginning of the war, to Major General at its end. As part of the Army of the Potomac he and units under his command served with great distinction in the battles of Fair Oaks, Antietam (in which he was seriously wounded), Gettysburg (in which he was wounded again and left for dead), the bitterly fought Battle of the Wilderness, and the movement on Richmond that bloodily brought the war to its conclusion. He was, despite his eccentricities, a very gallant officer whose career was rich in heroic acts, and an attractive personality. It is not at all difficult to see why Homer painted him. But what incident from his colorful career, if any, did Homer depict?

The details of the painting itself help to limit the range of possible circumstances from which such an incident might have been drawn, for in it Barlow has


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**Figure 6**
Confederate soldiers captured at Gettysburg. Photograph, 1865. Library of Congress

**Figure 7**
United States Army Corps Badges, 1865. From *Uniforms of the Civil War*
the rank of Brigadier General and is also clearly associated with the 1st Division of the 2nd Corps. He commanded this division only from April to August, 1864, when he relinquished his command because of illness. The subject of the painting, therefore, can only have occurred during the late spring and summer of 1864, which excludes from consideration such earlier events as those connected with the battles of Fair Oaks, Antietam, and Gettysburg. But during this period the 2nd Corps, with Barlow’s 1st Division, played a prominent role in Grant’s move on Richmond, and it ought to be among the events of this campaign—the battles of Spotsylvania Courthouse, or Cold Harbor, or the siege of Petersburg—that the subject of the painting is to be found.

There is indeed one event with which Barlow was particularly associated: the assault on the salient, the so-called “bloody angle,” at Spotsylvania Courthouse. There, on the morning of May 12, Barlow’s troops (with others of the 2nd Corps) accomplished a daring capture of the Confederate positions, the fruits of which were the taking of a division of three to four thousand prisoners, twenty-two standards, and the generals Edward Johnson and George Steuart. It was a stunning victory, one mentioned in every contemporary account of Barlow’s military exploits, and the one, more than any other, by which he became, as it was put shortly there-

31. It excludes, too, the later event of the surrender at Appomattox, at which Barlow was present, but not as a member of the 2nd Corps.
after, “one of the most conspicuous soldiers of the war—one of its most heroic and romantic figures.” It was so memorable that it was recalled a year later: “His capture of Gen. Edward Johnson and his entire division . . . is too recent in the story of the war to have been forgotten. It was the first substantial success of the new campaign, and Gen. Barlow was brought prominently before the people by his gallantry in these actions.” At about the same time (the occasion for these remarks has a possible connection with the painting and will be considered further below), another writer spoke of Barlow as “one of the most heroic and skillful of our soldiers,” and adduced as proof that “One of his achievements, the capture of a whole rebel division with its Generals at Spotsylvania, was perhaps the most brilliant single feat of the war.” Barlow’s fame, which was considerable, rested very largely upon the capture of numerous and prominent Confederate prisoners at Spotsylvania, and it is therefore a perfectly plausible, indeed an almost inescapable supposition that this is what the painting is about.

This supposition is enhanced by Homer’s presence at the front in the summer of 1864, at which time he gathered material for *A Skirmish in the Wilderness* (Figure 8) and *Defiance: Inviting a Shot Before Petersburg* (Figure 9), both painted later that year. It must have been at this

35. “He has already made a name that the history of American Liberty will forever honor”: *Harper’s Weekly*, July 9, 1864, p. 445; “What general in the Union army can show a more brilliant career?”: *New York Times*, September 23, 1865.
36. The suggestion in the entry on *Prisoners from the Front in Life*

**FIGURE 9**
Winslow Homer, *Defiance: Inviting a Shot before Petersburg, Virginia*. Oil on panel, 1864. 12 x 18 inches. The Detroit Institute of Arts, Gift of Dexter M. Ferry, Jr.
of Petersburg (Figure 11), but his emaciated features reflect the wound he suffered at Gettysburg the previous summer, from which he had not fully recovered and which would compel him to resign his command in August, 1864. In other words, Homer was present at the time and in the vicinity of the assault at Spotsylvania, although he probably did not witness the event itself, and had direct access to Barlow as well.37

But the matter is not so simple. For if Homer’s subject is the battle and surrender at Spotsylvania, it is a greatly distilled version of it—a ceremonial or symbolic re-enactment by five main actors of an event that involved thousands, and which is more accurately conveyed, despite its conventionalism, by the anonymous Currier and Ives lithograph of the Glorious Charge of Hancock’s Division (2nd) of the Army of the Potomac at the Battle near Spotsylvania Court House, Va., May 12th, 1864 (Figure 12), or in A. R. Waud’s double-page woodcut.

37. Homer did, however, inform an official of the Union League Club, which at one time owned A Skirmish in the Wilderness, that “it was painted from sketches made on the spot at the time of the battle”: (Goodrich, Homer, p. 230). Other evidence of his association with the 1st Division of the 2nd Corps at about this time is Army Boots (1865) (The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution), for its cloverleaf emblem can be seen on the tent at the upper right.

**FIGURE 10**


Time, too, that he sketched Barlow’s portrait (Figure 10), for not only does it appear on the verso of a sheet that also contains studies of the war-scarred landscape in America that material for this picture was gathered while Homer was attached to the 61st New York Volunteers in 1864, or, more likely, 1862, is clearly mistaken. It is possible that the officer in A Skirmish in the Wilderness carrying a long sword and bearing on his cap a red dot, which could be the badge of the 1st Division of the 2nd Corps, may be General Barlow, but he is too sketchily indicated to be sure. Defiance almost certainly depicts Confederate, not Union, positions; the gray uniforms, black banjo player, and, especially, the virtual identity between the defiant young soldier and the “cracker” in Prisoners from the Front, all indicate this. There was considerable fraternization during the siege of Petersburg, and Homer may actually have visited the Confederate side.

**FIGURE 11**

Winslow Homer, Landscape with Tree Stumps [Petersburg, Virginia]. Undated drawing, recto of Figure 10.
engraving, *Army of the Potomac—The Struggle for the Salient, near Spotsylvania, Virginia, May 12, 1864* (Harper’s Weekly, June 11, 1864). This may have been the only way in which Homer, given his distaste for such military pageants as these, could handle this subject. But the painting cannot, at the same time, make any great claim to strict historical accuracy in so greatly transformed and abbreviated a state. Another difficulty is that the landscape setting is not at all like that of the wilderness at Spotsylvania, with its dense foliage that Homer painted in *A Skirmish in the Wilderness* (and which is sketchily indicated in the Currier and Ives *Glorious Charge* as well as Waud’s *Struggle for the Salient*) but is decidedly more like the desolate, stump-filled wasteland of Petersburg.

The supposition that the painting is about a specific event at a specific place is also challenged by what is known or can be surmised about how it was made. No single study for the picture, or, for that matter, for any of its principal figural groups has survived, although a substantial number of Homer’s Civil War sketches, some of them related to *Prisoners from the Front*, do exist. Visitors to Homer’s New York studio in the University Building early in 1866, when he was working on *Prisoners from the Front*, all describe it as densely filled with drawings and oil sketches of war subjects as well as with military artifacts. One said his walls were “crowded with drawings, and sketches in oil, of incidents and episodes of war,”39 another mentioned “walls covered with drawings of soldiers and girls, and battles, and episodes of the camp and march,”40 and Thomas Bailey Aldrich inventoried “A crayon sketch of camp-life here and there on rough walls, a soldier’s over-coat dangling from a wooden peg, and suggesting a military execution, and a rusty regulation musket in one corner.”41

Although two of these visitors described *Prisoners from the Front*, upon which Homer was then at work, and which they presumably examined in his presence, neither mentioned any specific incident as its subject. There are also stories relating to this and other paintings of the time (and later ones, too) of how Homer employed live models and manikins for his figures.42 All

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38. Descriptions of the surrender accord in no way with the painting. Barlow himself, admittedly drawing on vague memory many years later (in 1879), said, “There was a little pattering of bullets, and I saw a few of our men on the ground; one discharge of artillery, that I remember, and we were up on the works with our hands full of guns, prisoners, colors”: “Capture of the Salient, May 12, 1864,” *Papers of the Military Historical Society of Massachusetts*, IV (Boston, 1905) p. 275. Brevet Lieutenant-Colonel William R. Driver wrote that “the rebel defenders surrendered after short resistance, and were immediately marched to the Federal rear and placed in charge of the provost marshal of the army”: ibid., p. 281. A method of handling prisoners shortly after battle is depicted in the lower right corner of A. R. Waud’s drawing and wood engraving, *General Barlow’s Charge at Cold Harbor, June 3, 1864*: Frederick E. Ray, *A. R. Waud, Civil War Artist* (New York, 1974) pl. 73, and *Harper’s Weekly*, June 11, 1864.

41. “Among the Studios. IV,” *Our Young Folks*, 2 (September 1866) p. 574.
42. “While Homer was painting ‘Prisoners from the Front’ and the rest of the army subjects of that period, he had a lay figure, which was alternately dressed up in the blue uniform of the Union soldier and the butter nut gray of the Confederate soldier, serving with soulless impartiality, now as a Northerner and now as a Southerner”: Downes, *The Life*, p. 55. Barlow’s son said Homer had General Nelson A. Miles, who served under his father in the war, pose for his figure in *Prisoners from the Front* (letter of April 4, 1938, Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives), which, in view of
of this strongly suggests that the picture, rather than being based on a single incident, was contrived in the studio from a number of sources, like the surviving sketches of Barlow and the Petersburg landscape, or even from material not in origin directly connected with the subject of the picture: for example, the sketch of a soldier’s head which Homer used for the figure to the left of Barlow (Figure 13) has the number 28 on his cap, but in the painting this has been changed to 61, to make the figure better serve a purpose to be mentioned below.43

This is the place for a few remarks about various sources lying outside Homer’s own art or his studio practice that have been proposed for Prisoners from the Front. John Wilmerding has recently suggested photographic affinities, if not, quite wisely, specific photographic sources, for Prisoners from the Front.44 It would be fitting and therefore attractive in light of what has been said above of the painting’s modern character to find that it had some real relationship to the modern imagery and technology of photography. But there is no substantial evidence in this case to compel one to yield to the current enthusiasm for discovering, or imagining, photographic sources. It is impossible to find among the multitude of photographs of the Civil War any directly related to the painting, nor is there mention of photographs in the descriptions of Homer’s richly stocked studio. On the contrary, everything discoverable about how the painting was made points to entirely conventional procedures. These are reflected in the painting’s formality of pose and composition (although this has to do also, of course, with the formal or ceremonial nature of the subject), and there is nothing about it, Wilmerding’s suggestions notwithstanding, to support an assertion of photographic inspiration, for the “posed stability” that he takes to be “characteristic of photography” is in this case much more plausibly a trait of a painting confected in the studio.45

Ellwood Parry has suggested a pictorial source for Prisoners from the Front, Baron Gros’s Capitulation of Madrid, December 4th, 1808 (Figure 14).46 The paintings

the survival of a sketch only of Barlow’s head but none of the entire figure and, too, of the almost monstrous proportion of head to body in the painting, may be true. And Thomas Baily Aldrich told how Homer, needing a model for The Bright Side (1865), went into the streets in search of one: “Among the Studios. III,” Our Young Folks, 2 (July 1866) p. 397.

43. The drawing Escort of a General (Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute), unquestionably related to Prisoners from the Front, was surely made before the painting rather than as a study for it, intended, but not used, as an illustration for post-Civil War publications. Drawings of this kind by Homer appeared in The Century, 35 (November 1887) pp. 132, 134; (February 1888) p. 324. Abundant examples of this type of illustration can be found in The American Heritage Collection of Civil War Art (New York, 1974).


45. Ibid. Wilmerding also speaks of “the close-up point of view, [and] the occasionally cropped or carefully framed compositions” as other attributes of Homer’s photographic inspiration, but they are quite absent from Prisoners from the Front. He also takes as a sure sign of Homer’s knowledge and use of photography his Gargoyles of Notre Dame (private collection), painted the year after Prisoners from the Front and allegedly based directly upon Charles Nègre’s 1853 calotype, Henri Le Secq at Notre Dame Cathedral (p. 43 and ill. 2–31, 2–33). But it is obvious that the painting and its putative source are not the same: the placement and pose of the figure, the gargoyles and other architectural details, and the view of Paris are all different; for Homer’s painting depicts the South Tower of Notre Dame, not the North, as does Nègre’s calotype (see Le Secq’s Gargoyles on the South Tower of Notre Dame, in Eugenia Parry Janis, “The Man on the Tower of Notre Dame: New Light on Henri Le Secq,” Image 19 [December, 1976] p. 20. Janis proposes an 1853 date for Nègre’s photograph on the basis of its affinities with Charles Meryon’s 1853 etching, Le Strige). It is fully within the range of possibility that Homer could have created this image unaided by

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are appropriately related in subject, and there are certainly similarities in pose and arrangement. But it is difficult, first, to imagine how Homer would have had access to this painting; and, second, their apparent similarities may be as easily explained by the inherently formal nature of their subjects as by any direct contact. But what most argues against this, as against any source, is that the construction of Prisoners from the Front is so simple, so lacking in intricacies or subtleties of pictorial—as distinct from psychological or sociological—organization, that it is almost absurd to think that Homer would have needed to seek inspiration or guidance in a formal model.

It is evident that Prisoners from the Front cannot be, strictly speaking, an “actual scene.” It may have been based upon an incident that Homer actually witnessed, which his presence at the front in the summer of 1864 makes entirely possible, but it was fully recast in his New York studio more than a year later using material available to him there, at least some of which was unrelated to the episode which he created, or recreated. But if the painting is an invention or confection and not an “actual scene,” or at best a synoptic and symbolic reference to one, why did Homer take such care, well beyond what would be required to give the aroma of authenticity, to insure the accuracy of detail? And why is Barlow its protagonist instead of someone more famous or even some totally invented type?

It is interesting, and cannot be entirely beside the point, to know that during the autumn of 1865, at about the time Homer must have conceived his picture, Barlow was running for high political office, Secretary of State on the Union or Republican ticket, in New York. And it is interesting and possibly significant, too, that Homer and Barlow, who were almost exactly the same age, were friends at this time. Their friendship probably began in the winter of 1861 or the summer of 1862, when Homer, on his first visit to the front as a
pictorial reporter, was attached to the 61st New York Volunteer Infantry, in command of then Colonel Barlow;\textsuperscript{47} it was resumed in the summer of 1864 (if not before), when now Brigadier General Barlow commanded the 1st Division of the 2nd Corps.

It is therefore possible that the painting had a bearing on Barlow’s campaign for political office, or that it was in some way the product of the friendship between Homer and Barlow. But the first possibility cannot be a real one, if only because the painting was not seen publicly until April, 1866, whereas Barlow had been elected the previous November. That the painting might have served a personal or private rather than public purpose is suggested, apart from the apparent friendship between the artist and his subject, by the reference, through the insignia that Homer added deliberately, to the 61st New York Infantry and thereby to the history of their friendship which dated to 1861 or 1862 when Barlow commanded that division. It is suggested also by the relatively small size of the painting, as though it had been designed for a private collection rather than for public display. Yet all of Homer’s pictures of this period were small,\textsuperscript{48} and Barlow himself never owned the picture.\textsuperscript{49}

But Barlow possessed virtues that belonged in the public domain and made him, friendship aside, an appropriate and attractive subject. One of them was his celebrity. Thanks to the publicity that accompanied his campaign for political office, the gallant feats of his military career (particularly the capture at Spotsylvania) and his rise through the ranks were often rehearsed and consequently well known; he was, as one writer said, “one of the most conspicuous soldiers of the war.”\textsuperscript{52} Another of his virtues was that, as a native New Yorker, he was a local hero for whom his fellow citizens could feel a special pride and have a special identification—a relationship that Homer understood, and underscored, by including in his picture a prominent representative of the 61st New York.\textsuperscript{50} It was, moreover, to a New York audience that the painting was directed in its debut in the Academy exhibition, and it is not at all fanciful to think that the young Homer, seeking his first major success as a painter, knowingly chose a locally familiar and popular, and therefore appealing, subject.

If friendship and some degree of calculation played roles in Homer’s selection of Barlow, in the final analysis it was probably dictated by loftier and more disinterested motives. For Barlow was, above all, an exemplary soldier: it was widely known that he was valiant and romantic,\textsuperscript{51} honest and upright in character, dutiful and diligent in conduct, modest in comportment, “animated by principle,”\textsuperscript{52} and motivated by deep moral conviction; that he was, in short, and as he was in fact described in 1865, “typical of the character of the ideal American,”\textsuperscript{53} a living symbol of those traits which, in

\textsuperscript{47} Barlow was appointed Lieutenant-Colonel of the 61st New York Volunteers on November 9, 1861; a letter of introduction from Harper’s, saying that Homer “is at present detailed for duty with the Army of the Potomac,” is dated October 8, 1861 (Goodrich, Homer, p. 230). But Downes (The Life, bet. pp. 34–35) reproduces a military pass issued to Homer, dated April 1, 1862, and it may have been at this time that he first met Barlow. Barlow, according to Downes (pp. 42–43), “did everything in his power to help the young artist and to facilitate his work.”

\textsuperscript{48} Thomas Bailey Aldrich indicated that this was a function of the size of his studio: “It is remarkable for nothing but its contracted dimensions; it seems altogether too small for a man to have a large idea in. If Mr. Homer were to paint a big battle-piece, he would be in as awkward a predicament as was the amiable Dr. Primrose, when he had the portraits of all his family painted on one canvas. ‘The picture,’ says the good old Vicar of Wakefield, ‘instead of gratifying our vanity, as we had hoped, leaned, in a mortifying manner, against the kitchen wall, where the canvas was stretched and painted, much too large to be got through any of the doors.’"; "Among the Studios. III.," Our Young Folks, 2 (July 1866) pp. 395–396.

\textsuperscript{49} It was purchased by John Taylor Johnston, and while owned by him was part of the United States exhibition at the Paris Exposition of 1867. It was sold to Samuel P. Avery in 1876, who, in turn, sold it to a private collector.

\textsuperscript{50} Seven companies of the 61st were recruited from New York City.

\textsuperscript{51} The devoted service and tragic death of Barlow’s wife during the war added another dimension of romantic appeal. “Married upon the eve of his departure for the war, his wife shared his fortunes, and with a zeal like that of her husband in the field, this accomplished and admirable woman devoted herself to the care of the sick and wounded soldiers in the hospitals. Her duties were most arduous; her devotion unwearied; and striken at last by mortal illness in the Fredericksburg hospital, she died [in July, 1864] refusing to allow her husband to know of her peril until it was too late”: “General Barlow,” Harper’s Weekly, October 7, 1865, p. 629.

\textsuperscript{52} New York Evening Post, April 28, 1866.

\textsuperscript{53} But “tempered,” the writer added, “with more modesty and greater reticence”: New York Times, September 23, 1865. His comrade-in-arms Nelson A. Miles said, “His integrity of purpose,
the collective view of the North, brought it victory in war and exemplified the institutions and beliefs from which that victory stemmed.

Barlow is not, however, the only conspicuous figure in the painting. His Southern counterpart, the Confederate officer, is equally prominent, and Homer took the same meticulous care with the details of his costume and insignia as he did with Barlow’s. It has not been possible to name this officer nor to identify the military unit to which he belonged because it has not been possible to identify the insignia so conspicuously displayed on his right sleeve, and which Homer evidently found interesting and important not only because of the prominence he gave it in the painting, but because he made a diagrammatic notation of it on the same page on which he sketched Barlow’s portrait (Figure 10). If there is any possibility that the painting represents an actual incident in the war it hinges almost entirely on the decipherment of that insignia, which, given the irregular and idiosyncratic nature of Confederate insignia and uniforms at the war’s end, does not hold much promise. In fact, it apparently did not have any particular meaning for Homer’s contemporaries, for one of the painting’s critics identified the officer as a South Carolinian and another as a Virginian.

Yet if this figure (and his insignia) does not yet provide the key to the identity of the incident depicted, he may provide a key to the painting’s meaning and to Homer’s method of constructing it. For this very same figure, identical in pose and in insignia and differing only in details of costume, appears in a wood engraving after or by Homer that served as the frontispiece for John Esten Cooke’s novel Surry of Eagle’s Nest, subtitled The Memoirs of a Staff Officer Serving in Virginia, which depicts Major Surry and the book’s heroine, May Beverley (Figure 15). Surry of Eagle’s Nest was published in New York by Bunce and Huntington in February, 1866, only a month or so before the exhibition of Prisoners from the Front. The novel had a considerable success, in large part because it was the first literary work to deal with the war, although it did so with a strongly Confederate sympathy. It tells of the adventures of

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Major Surry, member of an old Virginia family and aide to the most dashing of Confederate cavalry officers, General J. E. B. Stuart, closely following in these respects the life and experiences of the author himself, who had served as an aide to Stuart. The meat of the book consists of Cooke’s first-hand descriptions of the war from the Confederate point of view; the pervasive subject is the celebration of the chivalric virtues of the South.

Yet what does the obvious similarity between the figures of Surry in the illustration and the Confederate officer in the painting actually disclose? It might reveal

FIGURE 15
Winslow Homer, frontispiece to John Esten Cooke, Surrey of Eagle’s Nest (New York, 1866). Wood engraving, undated
the meaning of the insignia that both figures wear so conspicuously on their sleeves (and which is even more conspicuous in the illustration than in the painting). But the descriptions and circumstances of the novel are of no help in identifying it—except to indicate that it belongs to a Virginian. It might indicate that the painting is still another illustration of an episode from Surry of Eagle’s Nest. Yet it is not.

If the resemblance is not so precisely helpful in these respects as one might hope or expect, it does with reasonable certainty point to the source of both figures, the prototype that inspired and suffused them, and the prototype, too, that must surely have resided in the minds of Homer’s audience and served them as the instrument and standard for interpreting the meaning of his figure.

Whether the figures of Surry and the Confederate officer were based upon field sketches or were the artist’s invention is not known; there are, at any rate, no surviving drawings for them. But however they were developed the process was largely simultaneous, for, as visitors to Homer’s studio at the time noted, he was well at work on Prisoners from the Front in February, 1866, the same month in which Surry of Eagle’s Nest was published. Both figures, therefore, and not only the one in the illustration, were bred in a mind steeped in the chivalric lore of the Confederacy, which Cooke’s novel so fully, indeed fulsomely, describes, and both were designed to reflect it.

It is perhaps too much to expect that the audience for Prisoners from the Front would have been prepared in the same degree by a familiarity with Surry of Eagle’s Nest, although its date of publication and favorable reception make it entirely possible that some portion of it would carry its ideals and images in their understanding. It was not the generalized descriptions of Confederate chivalry in Cooke’s novel that supplied the clearest image of that trait of the South, however, but a historical figure, known to both North and South alike, who was its most concrete and perfect incarnation.

While the figures of Surry and the Confederate officer are nearly alike in bearing, dress, and insignia, they differ in several prominent details of costume. And while they were developed almost simultaneously, it is probable that the illustration may have slightly preceded the painting, just as the publication of the book in which it appeared preceded the exhibition of Prisoners from the Front. Its figure represents, at any rate, a lower order of generality than the painted figure, in the sense that it is closer to its—that is to say, their common—source of inspiration. This source is not the fictional character of Surry, but the personality upon whom Surry is so largely based, and who, in the novel, he served: General “Jeb” Stuart. Stuart was the most daring and elegant of Confederate cavalry officers, the one about whom “everything stirring, brilliant and picturesque seemed to centre . . . the cavalier par excellence.”

He was celebrated for his bold and sometimes reckless military exploits, but was marked equally by the manner, or mannerisms, of his dress—by the black ostrich-plumed hat, high leather boots, and tasseled yellow sash, all of which were not simply prominent articles of his attire but almost the attributes of his identity (Figure 16)—“the popular marks of the famous cavalier.” They are also, of course, distinctive features of Surry’s dress in the illustration, thus strongly pointing to Stuart as Homer’s model. The figure in the painting has been shorn of Stuart’s specific attributes, thereby making the connection with him less explicit, but he nevertheless corresponds in essential terms to Cooke’s description of Stuart on the occasion of Surry’s first meeting with him: “He was a man of twenty-five or thirty, of low stature, athletic figure, and with the air of a born cavalryman. There was no mistaking his arm of the service. He was the cavalier all over . . . evidently at home in the saddle, and who asked nothing better than ‘a fight or a frolic.’” And if the figure in Prisoners from the Front is in no sense a portrait of Stuart, he still fully exemplifies the Confederate cavalier in large part because his entire being is shaped by and saturated with those chivalric ideals of which Stuart was the celebrated paradigm, and to which the figure of Surry, in Homer’s illustration, provides the convincing link, and

56. Surry of Eagle’s Nest, pp. 82–83. In Wearing of the Gray Cooke wrote (p. 7), “There was about the man a flavour of chivalry and adventure which made him more like a knight of the middle age than a soldier of the prosaic nineteenth century.”
57. In his obituary in the Richmond Examiner (quoted in the New York Times, May 26, 1869) he was described as “the model of Vir-
indication that the relationship was not unknown to Homer.

In the final analysis, despite the many and faithful details and the presence of at least one identifiable historical personality and the allusion to another one, which raise the possibility that Homer may have represented a specific incident in the war, those commentators who understood, and who continue to understand, the painting as an epitome of the war prove to be correct. But what they failed to appreciate were the materials from, and the deliberate, methodical process by which Homer made an image of the war that was synoptic and endowed with symbolic authority and at the same time precise, credible, and convincingly real—to the degree that it seemed to a contemporary observer to represent an “actual scene.” He achieved this effective synthesis by drawing for each major and most meaningful part of the picture upon the best exemplification of its character and meaning that he knew of and had at his disposal. For his image of Union victory he depicted, or rather alluded to, the well-known surrender of the Confederate forces at Spotsylvania. For his image of the devastations of war he used the scarred and blighted landscape of Petersburg. (This landscape, which he studied at first hand, can, in its concise evocation of the ravages of war, be taken more as a symbol than as a geographic reality, and, though it is but the background, may carry an aspect of the painting’s profoundest meaning. For if the Civil War was the instrument of fundamental change in America through its destruction of the ideals that had nurtured and justified American nationality during the first half of the century, then the obliteration of the wilderness, which was the greatest symbol of that nationality, the token of its newness and innocence, the field of its enterprise, the relic of the country’s “national infancy,”58 and the setting of those temple-groves in which at least two generations of Americans approached the deity and learned of their national destiny and purpose—this obliteration could not be more starkly figured or better endowed with symbolic meaning than in Homer’s boundless war-scarred landscape. Furthermore, Homer’s post-Civil War image and its view of the war’s consequences is strikingly different from post-bellum paintings by American artists of earlier generations, such as Church, Inness, Cropsey, Gifford, and Durand, which stress renewal or a return to ante-bellum innocence: The cleansed new world of Church’s Rainy Season in the

Figure 16
James Ewell Brown Stuart. Undated photograph from The Photographic History of the Civil War, IV
Tropics [1866], the fruitful promise of Inness’s Peace and Plenty [1865] [Metropolitan Museum of Art], the retrospection of Cropsey’s Valley of the Wyoming [1865] [Metropolitan Museum of Art] and Starucca Viaduct [1865], Gifford’s Twilight on Hunter Mountain [1866], and Durand’s Catskill Clove [1866] are major instances of the prevailing interpretation, against which Homer’s realistic assessment stands in marked contrast.) And, finally, for his representatives of North and South he chose the two most legible exemplifications of their respective traits that he knew, indeed, knew intimately, from reality in one case and largely from literature in the other: his friend Francis Channing Barlow, represented in the fullness of his actual rank, position, and character, and a figure derived from, though not precisely depicting, “Jeb” Stuart, as the typification of the South, and the central figure in a group composed of other no less carefully selected social types. All of these different and even disparate elements Homer fused together in his studio into an entirely plausible and deeply meaningful blend of reality and fiction, of actuality and artifice.