The Captain of Company K, by Joseph Kirkland, was published in 1891, four years before Stephen Crane’s The Red Badge of Courage. Crane was not a veteran of the Civil War, but Kirkland was. While both novels exhibit the new tendency toward realism in American fiction, The Captain of Company K lacks the pervasive irony and naturalism of Crane—perhaps because Kirkland, a generation older than Crane, was also a veteran of The Great Sentimental Age. He is therefore an intriguing transitional figure, presenting war graphically but within the context of a conventional popular romance novel which would not have been out of place during and immediately before the Civil War. This may partly explain the artistic inferiority of The Captain of Company K, lacking as it does the unity, focus, and intensity of Crane’s Civil War novel. Being an ungenial juxtaposition of fiction and the author’s feelings, attitudes, and recollections, The Captain of Company K may have little to offer as art, but as a statement and reminiscence by a Civil War veteran it has high historical and current interest.

Kirkland’s novel deserves its neglect in literary history also because its characters are stereotypes—and this notwithstanding, many of them are still hardly distinguishable from each other at times without their highly artificial and overdrawn dialects, accents, and mannerisms—and because its plot is merely a series of individual incidents related to the unsatisfyingly predictable stock plot of a man winning a woman. Little illumination is thrown upon this man-woman dynamic, however; the book’s interest lies in its war scenes and the author’s attitude toward them.

Will Fargeon, a mild and humanitarian man, has been courting Sara Penrose, the typically beautiful and somewhat vain and headless elder daughter of a well-meaning befuddled clergyman. Will is persuaded by a typical Scottish uncle, Colin, to back up his own Union rhetoric and enlist, whereupon Company K of Chicago’s Sixth Illinois fills immediately and elects the sterling but peace-loving Fargeon its captain. Fortunately, Fargeon’s first lieutenant is “Mac” McClintock, an ideal soldier and wise veteran of the Mexican War. Will becomes a new man, a real man perhaps, during the first year of the war, and Sara and he declare their love for each other. Meanwhile Will and Mac become closer than brothers. At Shiloh Will loses part of a leg and Mac is apparently killed. Lydia, Sara’s younger sister and a typical second daughter, has fallen in love with an appreciative Mac, and the loss seems tragic. However, Mac had not been killed after all and returns from a Southern prison. There are two weddings, Will and Sara inherit Colin’s fortune, Mac becomes a career soldier and never gets his deserved promotion, Will becomes a surgeon and continues to clump around on the same wooden leg he got after Shiloh and saves the bloody shirtsleeve he used as a bandage, and the public goes on with its booming postwar business and couldn’t care less.

But the author invites us to look at his work as a personal document, and therefore we can go far beyond his vacuous plot and characters. He refers to the Union soldiers as “our” men and describes events as if he were an unnamed participant. He uses the first person at times: “God! If I wanted to magnify the pathos of all this, what could I say that would not belittle it?” (220), and
throughout makes direct statements about war: “... [which is] fortuitous death by an unseen missile from an unknown hand ... But to the average American brutal battle is better than irksome idleness.” (83)

It is not the empty wit of the characters’ dialogue that is interesting; it is rather the dialogue within Kirkland’s own voice (such as in the quotation above) that intrigues. On the one hand, Kirkland gives the reader sometimes rhetorical, sometimes vivid, statements on the evil of war. “Why are men so foolish,” is the unconsciously telling question that Sara asks as the story opens. As the company’s first skirmish is described Kirkland asks, “Is not the time coming when the rank and file ... will ... learn good sense ... [and] cry with one voice: ‘It is enough. We will have no more of it.’” (83) In that skirmish one of the men is not permitted to stop and care for his brother, who has just been shot:

“I don’t care if he’s your sister! Drop him and take your gun!”

Poor Aleck obeyed; laid down his burden, tenderly kissed the pale face, rose with tears streaming down his face, loaded his piece, crying. Still crying, went forward to the firing line, and cried and fought, fought and cried, as long as there was any fighting to do. Country —duty—glory? (99)

In a crucial scene, a party of truce delivers news to a dignified Confederate (Kirkland declines to capitalize the c) officer that his son is mortally wounded. The boy is “Young, strong, handsome, high-bred—curls, that might have been the pride of a doting mother ... Eyes fit to shine as the heaven of love and trust to some happy bride.” This sentimental description is followed by: “A bullet had torn clean through his lungs, and the breath made a dreadful noise escaping through the wound at every exhalation.” (104) A little later Will glimpses a man’s wounded hand: “... a broken bone, and bloody skin and flesh both fat and lean,” and feels “a little nausea.” (118) “Oh, how can a just God permit such things?” he cries (119), and not for the last time. The brother of the man described earlier dies and is hastily buried:

Our forces did not hold this position; and after we retired it is probable that some enemy found the spot and destroyed the simple record, or perhaps the wood-fires burned it, or hogs rooted it up. But what difference did that make? Nobody ever went back to look for it. (135)

In the description of the battle of Shiloh Kirkland writes:

How do men fall in battle?

Forward, as fall other slaughtered animals...

As they fall, so they lie, so they die and so they stiffen; and all the contortions seen by burial details and depicted by Verestchagin and other realistic painters are the natural result of the removal of bodies which have fallen with faces and limbs to the earth, and grown rigid without the rearrangement of “decent burial.” (279)

And he quotes Cowper: “War is a game which, were their subjects wise, / Kings would not play at.”

Is The Captain of Company K an anti-war novel, then? Just before the Cowper quotation, Kirkland says, “Then one must pause to remind himself that war did not invent death; nor does even blessed peace prevent it.” Then are the anti-war statements merely items which are conventional in a war story of the late nineteenth century? Kirkland suggests that his conscious purpose may have been to give his readers “an education ... concerning the realities of war from the point of view of the front-line men.” (158) This purpose would permit more than one feeling about war to be expressed, but perhaps Kirkland also has a less conscious attitude toward war which is not as ambiguous, and discoverable.

War does have its good aspects. Will Fargeon displays upon his enlistment a new and deeper quality, which others perceive in his face. (15) There is the bond Will begins to feel toward his men, and the affection and sense of responsibility that ensue: army life seems to be as pleasant as the feeling of love
he has for Sara—in fact one day he doesn’t even open a package from Sara as long as he is busy with the men (71); the conversation among soldiers can be sheer delight (73-74, for example); war teaches the difference between bravery and courage (86); nobility is tested and can be encouraged (112); civilian life is by contrast intricate and exasperating (152); the fatherly and brotherly aspects of a man can be brought out by army life: Will and Mac once went “stealing along the sleeping line of Company K, slipping two biscuits and a bit of pork into every sleeper’s haversack” (183-4); and in a very effective scene where Will stays behind enemy lines with his bleeding Irish corporal and cradles the dirty, smelly body to his own against the wet and cold (194ff) we see the selfless devotion war can call up among fellow sufferers.

But more important than all these to Kirkland seems to be the summation: war, in its terrible glory and its tragic, brutal beauty, is larger than peace. We see the aging Will Fargeon at the end, still devoted to his war experiences, memories, and friend, and know that war was the main event of his life. We see almost nothing of his civilian, married life after the war. Was Will as bored by the Fargeon home as it seems Kirkland was? War was intense, it was life; if often horrible, then life, real life, is often horrible. Peace is blessed but pale; peace is a washed-out mere absence of war. Peace has offered little to the reader—contrived, wooden, and unreal conversations among stereotypes—but war was interesting; to the characters themselves peace offered little—but war developed them and gave them something to do and to feel.

Before a conclusion is drawn from this, some other valuable aspects of the novel should be outlined. An historian would find many fascinating items of Civil War minutiae, ranging from how soldiers positioned themselves in sleep so as to keep their equipment dry in wet weather to how cannon fire sounded. The battle descriptions are excellent. Here is part of the description of how the surprise morning attack by the Con-

federate army at Shiloh looked to a unit not in a forward position:

"Hellow, Mac! What’s all this? Somebody else is reconnoitering I guess." For the sharp, untimely musketry persists in making itself heard from the outposts. Mac looks glum and anxious. He hurries up all the morning operations with asperity and profanity not usual with him.

The rattle of musketry becomes more and more steady and continuous. Scattered men without muskets begin straggling down the road toward the rear...

... the road is growing fuller and fuller of fugitives; here and there a wagon or ambulance, but chiefly infantry-men walking or running toward the river...

Still that rising approaching rattle of musketry... The distant sound of cannon has been heard some time; now comes the welcome thunder of a battery which has opened fire from our own side...

As the men gather on the color line in response to the long roll, they see the other regiments in the brigade hurriedly striking tents and scrambling them into wagons as best they can...

By this time the road has become a pandemonium of flying forces. Wagons go galloping in the rear in a nearly continuous stream, while twice there comes a yet more harrowing sight—the flight of caissons, forge and battery wagon; but no limbers and no cannon!

... Already bullets have made themselves heard...

... Now the wild yell of the enemy is audible, beginning far away on the left and spreading toward them. Now it is directly in front...

... A movement in the underbrush is perceptible, a glimpse of butternut...

It is also fascinating to see the soldiers described: the jokers, the skulkers, the officers, Grant, the enemy (gallant but blindly hostile), the soldiers from other states referred to with appreciation, the political appointee officers; what the soldiers
did in camp and how they talked, and what
they did and thought in battle. The helpful/
indifferent home front is seen, along with
painfully stereotypical blacks and Jews.
Significantly, the war's issues are absent—
which is realistic enough; blacks are not only
unimportant but when seen are childish,
ignorant and comical. Business is rapacious,
newspapers are unscrupulous, Washington is
incompetent—and after the war the soldiers
are forgotten by all three. Women are senti-
mentalized, but we see how even in the
North they helped inspire war. The surprising
etiquette, even between enemies, of the
early years is shown. We glimpse
immigrants and feel Kirkland's affectionate
but condescending attitude toward them.

Of great importance is Kirkland's position
relative to the sentimentality of the age he
comes from and the realism of the age he is
moving into. Women, Mother, grief and loss
are sentimentally regarded, as is appropriate
to American society of 1860, but battle,
wounds, the political and economic systems
are rendered realistically (and the author
seems to be quite consciously doing so.) This
is a key to evaluating Kirkland's attitude.

In the scene dealing with the Confederate
officer learning of his son's mortal wound
we read:

The grief-stricken father never raised his
hand to his eyes; but his frame wavered a little,
and from time to time he bowed his head and
shook it slightly, when one or two scattered
drops would shine for an instant in the sun as
they fell to the ground. (109-110)

This scene is significant because the
approach is sentimental; that is to say, the
author dwells on the pathos of the scene, and
the tragedy of wounding and loss and war in
general, and even shows us the regret and de-
pression of the decent man who shot the
Confederate officer's son—but the evil in-
herent in the situation has disappeared. It is
pathetic that the young man was mortally
wounded, but we do not hear about whether
it was good or evil to have shot him. The
basic issue (if the basic issue is a moral one)
is covered by valid sentiment—but covered.
Perhaps this is why Walker Percy says that a
sentimental people is a cruel people, and why
the Great Sentimental Age produced and/or
permitted such a cruel war. Pain and grief
are described in the novel, but killing is not
discussed (except that Sara at one point
lightly suggests that Willie might be changed to
"Killie."). In this regard the Captain of
Company K is inferior to, for example,
Howells' "Editha," in which the prime issue
is not death and suffering but killing.

War is interesting. There is a "joy of
battle" (303) against the intense glare of
which peaceful life appears hopelessly dull.
Kirkland expresses this fact honestly, though
he does not deal with the question of
whether the contrast is so obvious because
war is more real than peace or because our
civilian conduct is weak and foolish. Per-
haps the validity of Kirkland's observation
says more about peace as we manage it than
about war.

Kirkland's attitude displays human
nature. It does not affirm the health of the
human animal, but it does show us its con-
sistency: feelings similar to Kirkland's are
expressed in some recent Viet Nam fiction.
We are now ready to regret the neglect of
veterans which Kirkland also decries, and we
are willing to praise the comradery and
character development one can find in the
military. We can begin to understand why
some soldiers re-enlist for another tour in
Southeast Asia, and we are even ready to use
the words "honor" and "country."

Kirkland's novel will always be interest-
ing, but it is especially illuminative now. At
some times a country is in the frame of mind
to honor those who waged and endured a
war more than it is to honor those who
opposed and protested it.

**NOTE**

1 Joseph Kirkland, The Captain of Company K,
1891 Dibble Publishing Company edition. (Page num-
bers given in parentheses.)