FOREWORD

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Walt Whitman could no longer abide the carnage. He had spent the better part of eighteen months shuttling from his office to hospitals in Washington, D.C. He had seen hundreds of young men die and limbs lopped off routinely by surgeons drenched in blood, and had heard the heartbreaking moans of soldiers for whom death could not come too soon. In November 1863, Whitman took a train to Brooklyn for a self-imposed furlough.

He quickly left the war behind. Passing through Baltimore and Philadelphia, Whitman marveled at the scenes out his train window. "It looks anything else but war, everybody well dressed, plenty of money, markets boundless & the best, factories all busy." He was witnessing the birth of America's future: the bustling, commercial, industrial behemoths that would propel the nation to the top rank of economic powers by the turn of the twentieth century. The Civil War in the urban North was not a battleground; it was an opportunity.

Southern cities, of course, fared differently. And in their tale is the story of the South after the war as well. Atlanta, Columbia, and Richmond, and many smaller urban places suffered significantly during the war. Not only the physical trauma of war's terrible swift sword, but also the human drama of urban residents, many of whom were women and children. What was it like to live under a state of siege? We know about the cave dwellers of Vicksburg and how they were reduced to eating rats. But the fare and accommodations were scarcely better in other cities torn asunder by war. We know that women occasionally revolted in the urban South. What impact did these conditions have on their children? We need to know more about the trials of these non-combatants and how it affected them after the war and how these experiences may have shaped southern policy into the twentieth century. We write too much of triumph and not enough about trauma.

Southern cities demonstrated, as cities are wont to do, remarkable resilience coming back to a semblance of normal life within a few years of the war's end. Scarlett O'Hara was not alone in abandoning farming for the enterprise of Atlanta. But Scarlett was hardly the only southerner who figured out the future was in red brick, not red dirt.

It was not surprising that the former slaves became the most urbanized group of southerners after the Civil War. There was an old saying dating back as far as medieval Europe that "city air makes you free." Frederick Douglass wrote about his relative freedom in Baltimore before the war compared to his residence on the farm. Former slaves lit out for the city, sometimes to look for relatives, sometimes to look for work, and often just to escape from the surveillance of whites.

It was also not surprising that southern whites, many of whom had just returned from a bloody and lost war, would take umbrage at these new residents jostling for space and work and lord knows what else. New Orleans, Memphis, Natchez, and other southern cities were flashpoints of racial tension and violence as southern whites sought to restore white supremacy, albeit without the institution of slavery, but with something as close to it as possible. And African Americans resisted. So the story of Reconstruction-era southern cities is the story of the war's continuation in another context until the Redemption secured the Rebel victory that they could not gain on the battlefield. In this, the cities were little different from the rural parishes of Louisiana or the small towns of Mississippi and South Carolina.

It is well to talk of black agency and of the heroism of their few white allies in these southern cities. But the contest was woefully unequal from the start, even during the relatively brief era of Congressional Reconstruction. Frederick Douglass may have engaged in a bit of hyperbole when he characterized the Emancipation Proclamation as a "stupendous fraud," when he spoke on its twenty-fifth anniversary, but conditions for most of the former slaves, and now their offspring, were only marginally better than under bondage. And when Douglass spoke those words in 1888, the worst was yet to come: the carnival of lynching, disfranchisement, the codification of racial segregation, and the triumph of white supremacy generally. For these results, not only the South, but also the nation must take full responsibility.

Which takes us back to the Civil War itself, because ultimately this is more than a book about southern cities; it is a book about the South and the nation. Several years after Appomattox Walt Whitman sensed that the war's ultimate bloody lesson would evaporate in forgetfulness. "Future years will never know the seething hell and the black infernal background . . . of the Secession War." He feared "the real war will never get into the books."

For more than a generation we have been immersed in the "battle-cry-of-freedom" school of the Civil War that depicts the conflict as a holy struggle between good and evil resulting in the liberation of four million human beings and the salvation of the Union. The self-congratulatory message has subsumed Whitman's real war. The story of the urban South in war and Reconstruction is the story of hope and heartbreak, of promise and betrayal, and ultimately, of tragedy. It is the story of America.