“May our flags / kneel for us.”

What Though the Field Be Lost: Poet Christopher Kempf’s historical view of contemporary America

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Among the many shocking images witnessed on January 6 was that of Kevin Seefried, a supporter of Donald Trump, carrying a Confederate flag inside the United States Capitol. No Confederate soldier ever managed to enter the Capitol building during the Civil War, and the sight of Seefried carrying this symbol of slavery and reaction there during an attempted insurrection inspired revulsion.

Even when it does not emerge so forcefully into the open, history continues to make itself felt in our everyday lives. When poet Christopher Kempf moved to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and visited its Civil War battlefield, he was “completely moved by the presentness of the past there,” as he told the *Adroit Journal*. He began asking himself, he explains, how questions of race and regional identity persist today in America. How do we publicly remember the past? What allows a nation to remain united despite internal conflict?

Kempf’s historical and artistic instincts seem very healthy. By and large, American poetry is dominated at present by trivial concerns. For a poet to examine the processes that have produced the current social state of things, to shed light on the present with the aid of the past is an unusual and commendable artistic undertaking. However, that doesn’t mean one is obliged to treat Kempf’s efforts uncritically.

Whether the questions above are the most valuable ones that might be asked is an issue that arises when considering Kempf’s latest book of poetry, *What Though the Field Be Lost* (2021). The “presentness” of the Civil War, in our view, has more to do with the contemporary counterparts of the titanic social and class issues posed in 1861 than it does with problems of race, region and national unity.

But there are real strengths here. The new volume’s poems juxtapose Kempf’s personal experience with historical events, contemporary news reports, first-person accounts and allusions to literature and mythology. This synthetic approach often makes the interaction between past and present evident in a powerful and felicitous way.

Kempf spent part of his youth in the farmlands of Ohio and part in California. His first book of poetry, *Late in the Empire of Men* (2017), traced his coming of age in the rhetorical context of America’s westward expansion. Today he teaches at the University of Illinois.

In *What Though the Field Be Lost*, Kempf’s diction is crisp and precise (as in “The engine / ticked til it cooled.”). On occasion, it also can feel academic and even pedantic, as though we are hearing the voice of an observer who is largely shielded from the events he describes. Although the poems have an emotional component, their main motivation seems to be analysis: a search for insight.

The book takes its title from a line in poet John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667), which describes Satan’s rebellion against God, his defeat and his temptation of Adam and Eve. Critics have likened the angels’ uprising to a civil war, and Milton’s initial attempt to write the epic was indeed interrupted by the English Civil War. It is legitimate that Kempf turned to Milton after being inspired to focus on the American Civil War.

In the title poem, Kempf does not treat Confederate soldiers, enlisted in a historically and socially vile cause, as one-dimensional villains. He points out that most were conscripted and “cropped before that an acre or two they paid rent on,” hinting at class issues that Southern propagandists, during and after the Civil War, sought to suppress. More problematic are his lines about the “splendor” of a Confederate monument that depicts a soldier doggedly defending the colors with his rifle butt. “We see, we say, how they could do it.”

In lines like these, Kempf seems to be holding out an olive branch to those who romanticize or “soften” the Confederate cause, as well as those who extol military courage and self-

sacrifice as things in themselves. Southern soldiers showed undoubted bravery, this is one of the paradoxes of history, but the foulness of the interests for which they fought is something that should not be downplayed under present circumstances, when social reaction of a modern variety is raising its ugly head.

A more promising moment comes with the poem's citation of William Blake, who called Milton "a true Poet and of the Devil's party." Kempf asks, "Could we still—satisfied, so, / in our righteousness—admire that?" This question seems to rebuke the promoters of identity politics, who have little tolerance for ambiguity or critical thought. The responsibility of the "true Poet," Kempf implies, is to seek the truth in all its complexity, without regard for the self-appointed enforcers of a stunted and repressive morality.

"National Anthem," the book's opening poem, brims with life and optimism. It expresses hope for renewal and celebrates plurality. "Let the many / of us be one, the one be numerous / & mongrel." Kempf refers to "Huck & Jim," and to Grace Wisher, who sewed the flag that inspired Francis Scott Key to write the anthem. "May / dawn's early light lacquer our faces."

A strong anti-war message comes through in lines such as "may our planes on alert / over Khost & Riyadh whisper love songs / to the canyons beneath them." Kempf imagines a country in which "cop cars / flip Snapples to day laborers" and America fulfills its promise of freedom and equality. It is the most hopeful poem in the book. But if Kempf has ideas about how to realize these hopes, or about who is preventing their realization, he does not express them.

In "Michaux State Forest," Kempf and his wife run along a trail one midwinter morning. They are one part of a world that includes "flows / of copper from Chile to Santa Cruz / & the migrant workers of Sri Lanka / scaling their towers in Dubai." Noticing name plates on trees, Kempf contemplates "the French who began this labor. Who came / south with their fur trade…" Such incorporation of the wider world into the poems is refreshing.

This historical and literary panorama later sounds a note of doom. "When finally the earth … starves / us from its jade riversides it will not / be gentle." Such expressions of despair occasionally appear throughout the book.

Take "Natinals" [sic], where we find people gathered at a baseball game, "our cups / sloshing with the flattest of beers," watching as "a hero who is all of us, one / nation on his chest," strides to the plate. In "BEACH PARTY STEAK FRY," an event that "Washington, no doubt, dreamt for us / that winter at Valley Forge," the speaker relishes fried chicken wings "amid the fumes of fueling pickups / with Fanta & Boom-Boom Sauce."

Genuine affection comes through in Kempf's references to hot dogs and homecoming queens. We sense a celebration of America's plenty and a belief in the essential decency of the American working class. But we also encounter ridicule, which comes from a lack of historical perspective. "Is this what Washington and Lincoln fought for?" Kempf seems to ask. "Are the nativity scene and the revolving display of chrome DeSotos at the AutoZone the summit of American cultural development since the Civil War?"

This "back-and-forth" ambivalence about "America" is notable throughout the book. Kempf prefers to register the things he likes, on the one hand, and the things he doesn't, on the other, rather than treat US history as a single process, the development of a modern, internally contradictory capitalist nation. At times, his technique of interweaving history, literary quotations, observations on contemporary mass culture and personal experience, takes on an evasive character. The juxtapositions often are thought-provoking or funny, but Kempf never fully assimilates them into a unified perspective. One has the right to expect more in this regard from an artist with Kempf's knowledge and skill.

As noted above, to poetically transpose to the present the intensity and the remorseless, revolutionary character of the Civil War involves something more than visits to battlefields, as evocative as they may be, the insertion of bits of present pop culture or kitsch and even references to certain political issues of our time. It requires finding in the present the life-and-death equivalents of the matters that made the Civil War into such a decisive conflict, and those are, above all, social questions, including the malignant growth of social inequality.

Nonetheless, *What Though the Field Be Lost* is a serious and honest attempt to understand contemporary America. Kempf's ambition and artistic talent deserve recognition. His book is rich in observation and history, and the poems do provide glimpses of truth.