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Forty Acres and a Mule

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The March: A Novel by E.L. Doctorow
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In his historical novels, E.L. Doctorow has written about ragtime and the Rosenbergs, about mobsters and world fairs. His most recent novel deals with one of the most fraught subjects in US history: the long march of General William Tecumseh Sherman in the final months of the Civil War. The election of 1864 was a referendum on whether the Union should fight to achieve total victory or seek a negotiated peace, which would almost certainly have required the Union to rescind its emancipation of the slaves. President Lincoln was not willing to sacrifice the slaves to secure peace, but the opposition party, led by one of his former generals, was eager to do so. And so were the voters, worn down by three years of casualties and drafts. Lincoln's electoral chances fell even further when he was forced, in the middle of the election campaign, to draft 500,000 men to replace those whose enlistments were coming to an end. 'I am going to be beaten,' Lincoln confided to one of his officers, 'and unless some great change takes place *badly* beaten.' The great change was Sherman's capture of Atlanta, the centre of Southern industry and the hub of the Southern railroads. Northern morale soared, soldiers voluntarily re-enlisted, and Lincoln was re-elected.

After Atlanta fell, Sherman cut his army loose from its supply lines and sent his soldiers, all 60,000 of them, to live off the land by taking what they needed from civilians along the way. Arrayed in a line 25 miles across, the soldiers consumed all before them and left devastation in their wake. They marched nearly 300 miles to the sea. Then they turned north and marched another 400 miles through South and North Carolina, across land that the Confederate army believed to be impassable. Sherman's soldiers built roads across swamps and bridges across rivers, covering nearly ten miles a day despite unending mud and almost unceasing rain. By the end of the march, Sherman had cut the Confederacy in two, encircled its capital from the rear, and thoroughly demoralised the people of the South. Believing that the Confederates were beyond reason or persuasion, he meant to glut them with war until they were sick enough to renounce it.

Doctorow gives us the view from the ground. *The March* is constructed from brief episodes, each narrated from the perspective of a single character: this is Sherman's march as experienced by generals, privates and prisoners of war; slave owners, house slaves and field hands; doctors and nurses; reporters and photographers; priests, nuns and French chefs. For Doctorow, the march is too overwhelming to be comprehended as a whole. As the 60,000 soldiers approach, one character senses a pressure that 'had a murmur to it, or maybe a scent', while another hears a sound that 'wasn't exactly a sound', which then transforms itself into an impossible sight: a cloud of earth raining upwards to the sky. Any attempt to achieve a more comprehensive view fails. When a British reporter climbs a tree to watch a battle from above, all he can see is a 'terrifying vision of antediluvian breakout'. Then the tree is struck by a cannonball, and the fall from it kills him.

The march is a self-sufficient society. 'We have everything,' one character says, 'we meet every need.' There are doctors and nurses, carpenters and engineers, musicians and servants, coffins and guns. It is a 'floating world', an 'uprooted civilisation', a place in which people can remake themselves. A young slave woman passes as a white drummer boy; the daughter of a Southern judge joins the Union troops as a nurse; two Confederate soldiers put on Union uniforms when they find themselves on the wrong side of enemy lines. A photographer keeps a trunk full of costumes in his carriage, an emblem of a provisional world in which a uniform makes a man a soldier.

'It's always now,' someone endlessly repeats (a spike has been driven through his brain). He is speaking for everyone on the march, where the past has no significance and the future can't be pictured. There is very little indication of the characters' lives before they joined the march, and we don't wonder much about them after they pass from view. They are inventively imagined, but Doctorow's interest – and ours – is engaged less by them than by the world they jointly create.

The reconciliation of the Northern and Southern states in the years following the Civil War was made possible by a shared belief that both sides had at least fought for what they believed to be a just cause. At the end of Doctorow's novel, a handful of Confederate soldiers come to sit at Union fires after the armistice, and the men talk about the battles they fought as 'something they had done together, something shared'. But such conversations can't encompass war's brutality: a scapegoat is needed. Sherman, who had famously proclaimed that 'war is cruelty, and you cannot refine it,' was the obvious choice. He has remained a notorious figure. In 1994, the federal government proposed a monument to Sherman's soldiers, but the proposal was blocked by a North Carolina state official, who argued that Sherman was no better than Ivan the Terrible or Genghis Khan. That Sherman has Southern detractors is hardly surprising, but he has almost no Northern supporters either.

The March brilliantly revises the received view of Sherman, and recovers the full complexity

of this pivotal event. It does so, in part, by showing that there were limits to Sherman's destructiveness. In this, Doctorow follows the recent work of such military historians as Mark Grimsley, who have argued that what has long been described as total war was in fact targeted on the Confederacy's economic and military assets, and that Sherman's troops acted according to the rules of war. Doctorow shows Sherman riding through a conquered city, pointing out which factories and mills are to be destroyed. And he emphasises that the wanton destruction for which Sherman's troops were notorious was confined to South Carolina, the first state to secede, and stopped entirely at the border to North Carolina, which seceded only reluctantly and late.

Doctorow also shows that Sherman tried not only to destroy the old South, but also to create the new. He dramatises something that tends to be forgotten: the march of the freed slaves which followed the march of the soldiers. The slaves believed that Sherman had come expressly to liberate them, and many exercised their new freedom by following him. The second march, as Doctorow describes it, is very different from the first. It, too, swells to include tens of thousands of people, but there is nothing uncanny about it. Everything is comfortably familiar: the freed slaves walk as if they were going 'to a church meeting or a picnic'. This second march posed enormous problems for the army, which had no food or shelter for the freed slaves, and no way of transporting the old and the infirm. 'We are fighting a damn war for you,' one of Sherman's soldiers says to a freed woman in *The March*. 'Alls we ask is you don't get in the way.'

During a hasty retreat, one of Sherman's generals decided to rid himself of the freed slaves trailing behind. Having built a makeshift bridge across a river, he made the freed slaves wait until all the soldiers were across. Then he cut the ropes, leaving them stranded. Many tried to swim across: some drowned, others were killed by the advancing Confederates. News of the event reached Sherman's enemies in Lincoln's cabinet, and Edwin Stanton, the secretary of war, came to investigate. Sherman invited 20 black ministers to meet Stanton, who asked them how they conceived of freedom and slavery. What followed was a remarkable symposium on the nature of freedom, which Doctorow reproduces in detail. The ministers' spokesman replied that 'slavery is receiving by irresistible power the work of another man, and not by his consent,' and that freedom was 'taking us from under the yoke of bondage and placing us where we can reap the fruits of our own labour, and take care of ourselves and assist the government in maintaining our freedom'. And, in a passage that Doctorow leaves out, he added that this freedom could be maintained only if the freed slaves had land of their own.

Land is what Sherman decided to give them. His famous Special Field Order 15 declared that plantations should be divided into forty-acre plots and given to the freed slaves. He later lent them army mules, and the phrase 'forty acres and a mule' has since been used to refer to all efforts to redistribute land to former slaves. Doctorow describes them standing in line in the

wind and the rain, praying that they will be given what they believe they are owed. This hopeful episode is the less examined counterpart to the scenes of burning and looting, and it was equally Sherman's work.

And yet this epochal event happened almost by accident, an irony that the novel, with its focus on the contingencies of individual action, is well equipped to capture. Sherman insisted in his *Memoirs* that Field Order 15 was 'very fully' considered and 'very carefully' written, but the novel reminds us of the capriciousness with which other such orders had been passed. Field Order 14, for instance, was written after an enraged old woman swung her heavy purse at Sherman's head. As Doctorow has it, Sherman ducks for safety and calls out to one of his aides: 'A new Field Order, Morrison: Ladies will please check their handbags at the door.' The novel implies that Field Order 15 came about in much the same way. Threatened by the meddling of his political enemies and impeded by the presence of the freed slaves, Sherman suddenly realises that he can solve both problems at once. The welfare of the freed slaves is the least of his concerns: 'I am no abolitionist,' he acknowledges. 'But with this enticement I both shut up Edwin Stanton and disengage the niggers, who will stay here to plant their forty acres, and God help them.' 'We are an army,' Doctorow's Sherman insists, 'not a benevolent aid society.' Yet that was precisely what his army was forced by circumstance to become. And the ad hoc provisions made for the freed slaves were often taken up by the Freedman's Bureaus, which were established in the Southern states after the war, the federal government's first attempt to provide comprehensive care for all of its citizens. In this way, Sherman the destroyer helped to lay the grounds for the US welfare state.

With the end of the war, Sherman's army disbands and the characters are left not quite knowing what to do. Sherman, again outmanoeuvred by politicians, imagines issuing 'Sherman's Special Field Order to himself': that he return to the forest and sleep one more night in a tent. Only a handful of characters attempt to imagine a future, and nearly all of them are former slaves. A freed man and a freed woman who have fallen in love on the march decide to take the land Sherman is offering. The man pictures a life in which they will sit by the fire at night, the woman teaching him to read and write. They will wake in the morning and work hard on their 'forty acres of good loam' with 'a plow and a mule and some seed'. The photographer's assistant, who has adopted a slave child on the march, plans to return with the child to Baltimore and set up his own photography studio: he will start by taking photographs of returned soldiers wearing their uniforms for the last time.

And finally a young freed woman who has variously served as a drummer boy and an army nurse is left trying to decide what to do with herself. She has fallen in love with an Irish soldier from the slums of New York: he wants to spend the money he earned from enlisting on studying law, and thinks that she should go to medical school. When she points out that she is a black woman and may not be admitted, he promises to 'argue the case in court'. The exchange is vastly anachronistic. This is the language of present-day aspiration, replete with

conventionally upper-middle-class professions and a faith in the power of anti-discrimination law. The anachronism serves a function, however: it projects the freed woman and the Irish man into a partially accommodating future, into a world much like our own.

In 1866, Field Order 15 was revoked by Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson. The couple who took the land Sherman offered had done so fearing that it would be taken away, and fearing more generally that the Union soldiers would prove to be 'white folks first and foremost'. They were right to be afraid. The Union soldiers didn't fully withdraw from the Southern states until 1877, and during this period of occupation – usually known as Reconstruction – they secured at least some of the rights that had been conferred on the free slaves. African-American men were permitted to vote, and some even served as state legislators. But at the same time African-American men and women were being deprived of the land on which freedom depended. The land that had been redistributed to the freed slaves was returned to the former slave owners and, as Eric Foner has shown, the freed slaves were coerced into working for their former masters for low wages. After Reconstruction their situation worsened. The Southern state governments began to revoke their new rights; the federal government, which was more committed to sectional reconciliation than to racial justice, did not intervene. These rights were not fully restored until the 1960s. Doctorow does not describe the failure of Field Order 15, but in depicting its temporary success, he reminds us that the great tragedy of Sherman's march may lie not in what he destroyed, but in what he failed to create.

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