

Would to God I could tear the page from these memoirs and from my own memory: Co. Aytch and the Confederate Sensibility of Loss.

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 **"Would to God I could tear the page from these memoirs and from my own memory": Co. Aytch and the Confederate Sensibility of Loss**

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

"Would to God I could tear the page from these memoirs and from my own memory"
Co. Aytch and the Confederate Sensibility of Loss

While my imagination is like the weaver's shuttle, playing backward and forward through these two decades of time, I ask myself, Are these things real? Did they happen? Are they being enacted today? Or are they the fancies of the imagination in forgetful reverie?

—Sam R. Watkins, *Co. Aytch*, 1882¹



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Watkins enlisted with 110 other "Maury Co. Braves," as they were originally called, in Company H of the First Tennessee Infantry regiment and served throughout the war.

*Private Sam Watkins, Confederate infantry soldier in the American Civil War and author of the postwar memoir *Co. Aytch*, ca. 1861–1865, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.*

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The Confederate undead have a way of rising, zombie-like, to haunt the American landscape," the journalist Tony Horwitz wrote recently in the *Washington Post* following the far-right demonstration against the

removal of the Robert E. Lee statue in Charlottesville. "Even so," he continued, "it appears we're nearing the end of the Confederacy's interminable after-life." And yet, in the wake of Charlottesville, it is important to observe that new Confederate monuments and historical markers are consecrated wherever the flame of memory flickers. One such marker in a cemetery in Columbia, Tennessee, erected with the support of the Sons of Confederate Veterans in September 2014 by the Civil War Trails commission, commemorates the life of Sam Watkins, whose famous 1882 memoir epitomized the "Johnny Reb" spirit of the Confederacy that refuses to die.²

Horwitz has history with Watkins. While conducting field research for *Confederates in the Attic*, his 1998 investigation of the unfinished Civil War, Horwitz camped out at Shiloh on the anniversary of the battle that took place there in April 1862. To prepare for his Shiloh pilgrimage, Horwitz turned to *Co. Aytch* (as in "H"), the 1882 memoir of Sam R. Watkins, a Confederate soldier from Tennessee who, like most of his comrades, first "saw the elephant" of battle at Shiloh. More than 24,000 men were killed or wounded at Shiloh, proving to Americans of all sympathies that both sides were prepared to take heavy losses and that the war would be long and require huge sacrifices. Ken Burns used *Co. Aytch* as a primary source in his made-for-television documentary epic about the Civil War, which featured Watkins as the representative voice of the Confederate soldier. So Horwitz was on sure ground in turning to Watkins's memoir: it was a widely known source, highly regarded by scholars and popular historians alike for the perspective it provided on the ordinary soldier's experience. What Horwitz did not realize, however, was that Watkins's memoir exhibited a rebel's yell of anguish at the experience of war that provides vital clues to the character and persistence of a Confederate sensibility into the twenty-first century.

The day dawned as "clear, beautiful and still" for Horwitz in 1998 as it had for Watkins in 1862. When first facing the enemy at Shiloh, many of Watkins's comrades were stricken by fear, their bowels emptying involuntarily; Watkins also recalled seeing one man shoot off a finger in

order to avoid the fight. "Watkins's own bravado faltered," Horwitz writes, "at a field littered with the dead and wounded," a scene the veteran had recalled in 1882 in a dreamlike sequence, the dead lying with their eyes open, jumbled up with horses, cannons, and wagons, the wounded "begging piteously for help." Horwitz spent the rest of the morning examining the ground upon which so many men had given their lives and talking to other pilgrims who visit Shiloh every year on this anniversary date. Walking into the middle of Duncan Field, the site of a Confederate charge, Horwitz succumbed to "a boyish impulse" and "rushed the Union line, trying to conjure the buzz of **[End Page 8]** bullets." Then, upon reaching the Sunken Road from where Union shooters tore into the advancing Rebels with such ferocity that the ground in front of...

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Co. Aytch and the Confederate Sensibility of Loss

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