



# CIVIL WAR

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# War and Paint

by Ben Cleary



**Death and Indignity** *Men of the 48th Pennsylvania erected a monument where their 25-year-old colonel, George Gowan, fell dead at Petersburg. Gowan-in-bronze now spends eternity gazing at monuments of a different sort on the field where he died.*

James L. McElhinney

■ "This is the killing ground." James McElhinney stands in a cul-de-sac a few paces from Beaver Dam Creek, the suburban Richmond, Virginia, stream that gave its name to the June 1862 battle. "The Confederates crossed here and made repeated assaults on the Union soldiers entrenched on that hill." His sweeping gesture takes in houses from two developments, Bruce Estates and Amber Forest. A nearby National Park Service marker says 1,845 men died in the battle. Innocently-named subdivisions on fields of terrible slaughter are common in eastern Hanover County.

We start up the hill. It's noon. I've trailed McElhinney all morning in a thus-far-unsuccessful scouting expedition for painting sites. We pass a heap of discarded tires, a pile of construction debris and two workmen lunching in an idling dump truck. McElhinney surveys the landscape, discusses the battle, then stops in front of a just-finished house built solidly on top of the Union trenchline. In the foreground is a granite-mounted historic marker invoking Stonewall Jackson.

"That's it!" he says. "That's a painting."

Present-day Civil War art is mostly melodramatic: the Central Casting foot soldier lifts a bullet-riddled standard from the dying grasp of a fallen comrade; the handsome officer rears his horse and waves his troops into the fray.

McElhinney's work is completely different. For one thing, it's landscape: the human figure is completely absent. And while the technique is impeccable — McElhinney has degrees from Yale and Temple University's Tyler School of Art — it's the subtext that most viewers find compelling. The soybean field,

Other paintings are shocking in their juxtaposition of commercial and memorial sites. In "The 48th Pennsylvania Infantry Monument South of Petersburg" a statue of Colonel George W. Gowen, who had half his head blown away on the spot in April 1865, shares space with an enormous "Merchant's Tire and Auto" sign. The canvas is crosshatched with telephone wires.

"It's history and commerce going eyeball-to-eyeball," says McElhinney of the painting. "There's Colonel Gowen standing at parade rest, trying to

past summer at the Peninsula Fine Arts Center. "What they aim at instead is a landscape literally torn apart by conflict, including the clash between the past and present as well as the struggle between blue and gray."

McElhinney has exhibited his Civil War canvases elsewhere in Virginia as well as in Tennessee, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania. Paradoxically, he has yet to show in Richmond, his current home base and the subject of much of his art.

"I'm going to do something possibly ballsy, possibly stupid." McElhinney



*A Little Corner of Hell* The 20th century could learn no lessons from infamous Libby Prison in Richmond so has put its site to other presumably more important use.

for instance, depicted in the painting "Malvern Hill from Berdan's Skirmish Line," was once covered with 5,000 dead and dying Confederates. The morning after the battle, wrote a Union officer, "enough were alive and moving to give it a singular crawling effect."

decide between Michelin and Goodyear. He's been to war, now he's buying a tire."

"McElhinney's canvases deliberately look past the lure of heroic sacrifice and valor," wrote a Newport News *Daily Press* reviewer about a show this

stands in a Shockoe Bottom parking lot painting a section of the new flood-wall that occupies the site of Libby Prison, famous during the war for its terrible treatment of Union officers. "Danger and excitement," he says jovially. "A painter has to take risks. If

you don't take risks you don't see anything new."

I'm suddenly apprehensive. For the last hour McElhinney's been working on fine details and I've grown attached to the painting as it is. Along with the floodwall, it includes a view of the Richmond skyline I've enjoyed since I was a teenager. I'd been remembering nearby beery conversations with my buddies about women and the meaning of life.

McElhinney's left out lots of cluttering details. A chain link fence, for instance, that wasn't installed a few

paints four brown, painful lines — telephone poles. Thoughts of the maniac slashing Rembrandt's "Nightwatch." "Libby Prison" is immediately less romantic.

"An homage to the birth of perspective, the Florentines, with a nod to Piero della Francesca — the tree in the middle of the foreground as a way of measuring space."

McElhinney can paint and talk at the same time. He switches from art to history. "In 1893 a group of people decided to pull down the prison and move it stone by stone to the Columbian Exposition in Chicago. People paid to see the notorious Libby Prison. Later it was pulled down again— some of the bricks were used to build the Chicago coliseum.

"It's interesting to think of those stones moving from Virginia to Illinois. They went from being part of a prison to being part of a tourist attraction to being part of an arena. The only part of the structure that remains in Richmond is over in a patio at a private school on the southside. Stony Point School has a number of the original stones that served as a paving surface for the ground floor of the prison."

According to the *Newport News Daily Press*, "McElhinney prepares for a painting like a general sizing up a military campaign." He intensively researches each of the sites he paints — down to the very paving stones. He also approaches his subject from non-scholarly angles. He's taken hot air balloon rides over the battlefields to study the terrain. He's also become a reenactor, por-

traying two characters, a journalist and an engineer, both from the North. According to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*: "What McElhinney does is fresh and new because he has reserves of historical knowledge as well as special insights that are played out in the paintings."

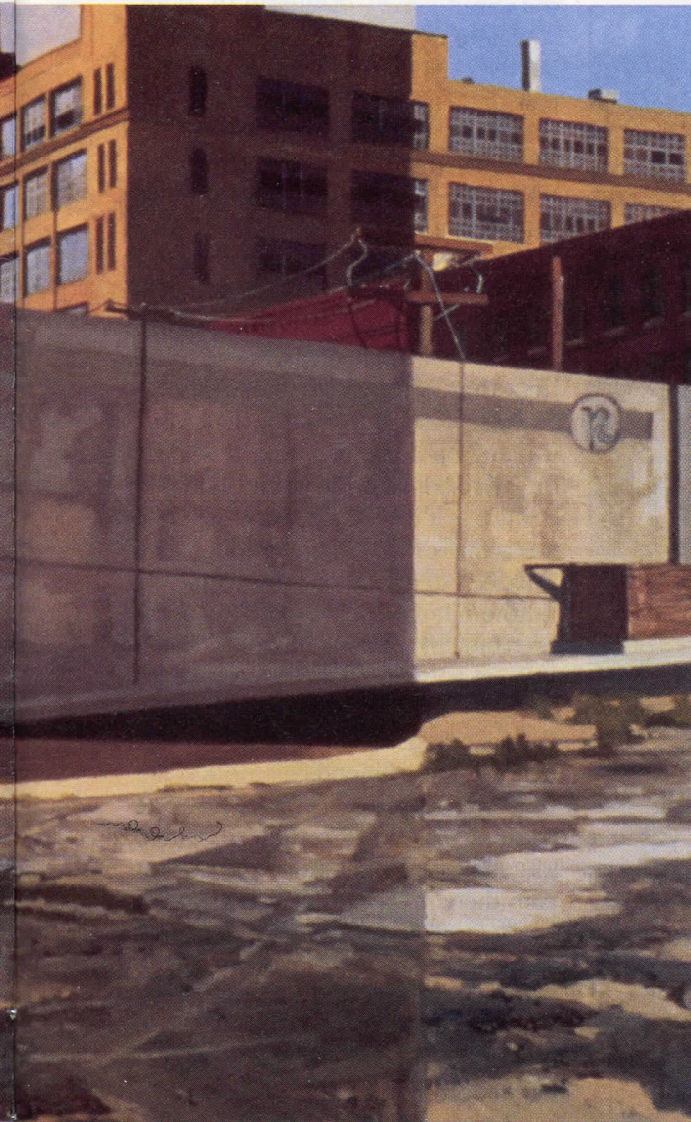
His first Civil War painting, in January 1991, was of a small earthwork that seems to be guarding the parking lot of a Contel Cellular office building near Mechanicsville. He's done some 60 canvases since. For awhile he only visited Virginia on holidays, flying or driving down from his teaching job at the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design. This summer he moved to Richmond to devote himself to what he calls "the project" full time.

Two couples in a van stop, walk over, admire the canvas, then tell a story about a tragic mother-and-child car accident in the nearby canal years ago: "They found the baby but they never found that lady." A construction worker rides up on a bicycle. He confides that he's learning how to use an airbrush.

"Keep at it," says McElhinney. "Practice makes perfect." He repeats the old chestnut about the New Yorker who was asked how to get to Carnegie Hall: "Practice, man, practice."

It's lunchtime. More people congregate. McElhinney paints and answers questions, talking about how the floodwall, "a low evil-looking thing," suggests a prison wall and the irony of a structure that's saving commerce in the Bottom crossing the site of atrocity and human suffering. I sit on the hood of my car and fill in the gaps in my notes. After lunch the people drift away. When I walk back and look at "Libby Prison" I realize that the telephone poles are an improvement. I like the painting better with them in.

"I'm just a painter trying to find a different aesthetic, a different way to see the landscape. I'm not talking about aesthetics as a bunch of obfuscatory ideas couched in artspeak—that was my training, I went to Tyler and Yale, I got a lot of that. I can walk the walk I can talk the talk, but I'm not interested in that anymore. I'm really interested in looking at things and discovering what it feels like to look at something and what that feeling means. Ultimately, when you think about 'What is the meaning of an aesthetic?' it's something that makes you feel a certain way, right? Otherwise you've got anesthesia, which numbs you." He chuckles. "So you've got an aesthetic and you've got anesthetic. You want an anesthetic, you go to the doctor."



James L. McElhinney

weeks ago when he started the painting. What's he going to do to this nearly perfect evocation of my personal past?

"If you don't take risks you may as well be dead."

He applies brush to canvas and

A bearded jogger in black bicycle shorts makes a detour and checks out "Libby Prison" without breaking stride.

"You get a lot of interesting people around here," says McElhinney. "I've had everybody talk to me from ex-cons to homeless hobos to jogging women in the latest haute exercise couture to Civil War buffs to construction workers to policemen to the floodwall coordinator for the city of Richmond.

"When I go to paint any site I normally find myself in contact with some segment of the public. No matter where you are somebody's going to

why he wanted to tell me that. People say things to me when I'm out painting that they wouldn't say to anyone else — I think it's because they connect with the work.

watching McElhinney paint. He works quickly with complete assurance, seemingly without thinking about it. He's trying to get the roadside grass exactly right.

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"These sites are the physical memories of our society's past, memories frozen in the sculpted earth."

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"I was painting outside of Petersburg and this sort of good ol' boy comes by in a pickup truck and he's got long hair, tattoos — more tat-

"They say half of painting is drawing, the other half is color mixing. Once you learn it you're not really aware of the physical act, just the color you want."

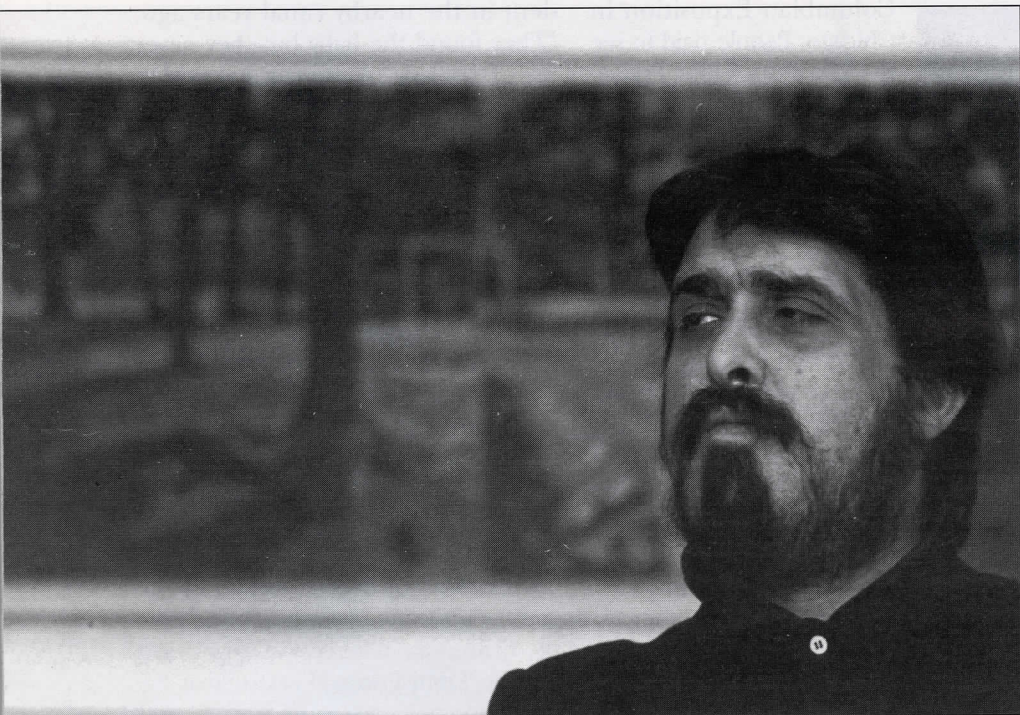
The quietness and the solitude of Malvern Hill start working on my imagination. The sound of a passing airplane suggests an incoming shell. Wind rustles the leaves of the soybeans. The movement brings to mind the "singular crawling effect" produced by the agonies of the wounded that the Union officer noted the morning after the battle.

This is only one in a series of paintings that McElhinney has done at Malvern Hill. "Last spring I was out working on a painting here. I worked on it for about a week, going out everyday just as if it were a job. On the day I was actually flying home to Milwaukee I decided to go out one more time. As I drove out the Darbytown Road, I was overcome by a feeling of sadness and a sense of tragedy. All the leaves were off the trees, and I could see earthworks in the woods as I drove — the outer defenses of Richmond.

"I went up the hill to where the painting was being produced. There was a sense of great sadness and great pain there. I can't explain it. It wasn't really an extrasensory experience — but there is a resonance in these places. It was disturbing. All of a sudden after a week I became intensely aware of the horror that was there for a few hours on the first of July 1862.

"I was confused because I hadn't felt that way on location before. It evidenced that I was getting more in touch with my subject matter. And I realized that I'm not going to be able to paint these sites forever. There's just too much tragedy in them, too much pain."

The wind dies down. In the distance we can hear the working of a



James L. McElhinney

Photograph by Jay Paul, *Style Weekly*

come along sooner or later. The anecdotes that I've collected on my travels are very rich.

"At Five Forks an old man came by in a pickup truck and told me he was trained at the Corcoran School of Art. He came home to take over the family farm when his father passed away and he never got back to his artwork again — but he had all of it in the barn. What could he do with it? So I said, 'Well, first thing, you get it out of the barn.'"

McElhinney chuckles, then turns serious. "Then he told me he had no children. He had been in World War II somewhere in Southeast Asia and had come down with a case of malaria that had rendered him sterile.

"He was telling me something that was a personal tragedy. I don't know

toos than teeth, as I remember — leans out of the truck — he was at a stoplight and says, 'Hey boy!' I ignore him. He honks his horn and says 'Hey boy!' I turn around and give him a dirty look. He says 'Hey man!'"

McElhinney laughs. "He says, 'You're good. You do some mean shade. You could do tattoo.' I guess coming from him that was a high compliment."

Few cars pass the day I watch McElhinney paint at Malvern Hill. Only one person stops to talk, a construction worker from Maine by way of Alaska who has an ancestor who fought in the battle. He was thinking of doing some kind of book of the ancestor's letters. He and McElhinney talk about towns they both know in Maine.

The man leaves. It's hypnotic

gravel pit. Part of the Malvern Hill battlefield may be developed as a gravel pit soon.

"In the three years I've been involved in this project I've seen a number of sites fall under the backhoe, the bulldozer. It's a shame because as a society we're losing a sense of identity that's derived from a sense of place. These sites are the physical memories of our society's past, memories frozen in the sculpted earth.

"When I look at a battlefield, I imagine it as the childhood scars of a nation. If we permit the sites to slip away, to disappear beneath housing tracts and shopping malls and the asphalt sprawl, then we become like criminals removing their fingerprints seeking anonymity. And that's exactly what we'll find — we'll lose that sense of identity that comes from having these sites around. What we'll leave the future is a lot of people in a state of historical amnesia and a completely meaningless terrain."

Another day, on another scouting expedition for painting sites, we follow the route of Lee's retreat from Petersburg to Appomattox. McElhinney can't find anything to paint. The armies, he speculates, moved over the land too fast to change it or be influenced by it in any significant way.

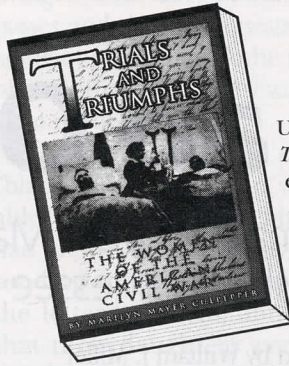
We detour to the Farmville High Bridge over the Appomattox River, site of a skirmish during the retreat. McElhinney's friend, Richmond artist Willie Anne Wright, had told him it was a good subject. She also works with Civil War themes, taking photographs of sites and reenactors with a pinhole camera. They've exhibited their work together several times.

It's early afternoon of an incredibly hot summer day. We park almost a mile away and start following the railroad tracks. McElhinney becomes more excited the closer we get to the bridge. He's well over six feet tall. His stride lengthens with his enthusiasm until I am actually running to keep up.

He stops at the edge of the bridge. The land falls away dramatically revealing the pilings of the old bridge and a panorama of the river basin that has probably changed little since the 1860s.

"Yes!" McElhinney holds his arms out as if to embrace the view. "That's a painting!" - *CW*

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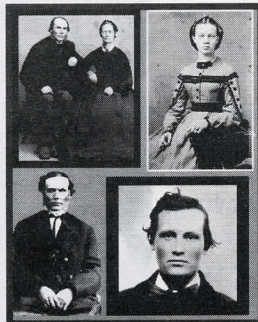
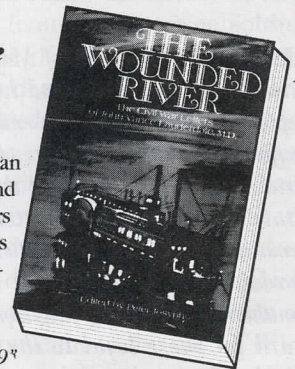
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