

The Civil War Book Club An Autograph Resource

IN 1955 RALPH G. NEWMAN, WHO founded Chicago's famed Abraham Lincoln Book Shop in 1938 at the suggestion of author Carl Sandburg, began planning the centennial of the Civil War. He founded the Civil War Book Club, an endeavor to place the best new Civil War titles into the hands of Civil War buffs.

According to Robert J. Cook, author of *Troubled Commemoration: The Civil War Centennial, 1961-1965*, the Civil War Book Club had 2,142 members in less than one year. The Book-of-the-Month Club we know today was operating successfully at that time, as were other lesser-known book clubs, producing inexpensive editions of popular titles by using a smaller trim size, lighter paper, inferior ink and other downgrades.

Newman's Civil War Book Club, though, was one of the first specialized book clubs. In some ways the CWBC worked like most book clubs. Members received a publication, the *Civil War Book Club Review*, containing reviews of upcoming titles, which they could either accept or decline. But the CWBC differed from other book clubs in two significant respects.

First, rather than purchasing reprint rights and printing plates from the publishers of the original trade editions and publishing his own edition—a large investment in money, manpower and materials—the CWBC never published their own editions. Newman simply purchased first edition copies direct from the publisher. Dan Weinberg, current and long-time owner of the Abraham Lincoln Book Shop, agrees with my belief that the CWBC did not strive to issue a consistent quantity of each title. Newman simply ordered however many copies he thought would sell.

So what is a CWBC edition if they never published their own editions under their own imprint? Why would a Civil War buff buy them instead of a regular bookstore copy? Enter the second significant difference between book club editions and the CWBC.

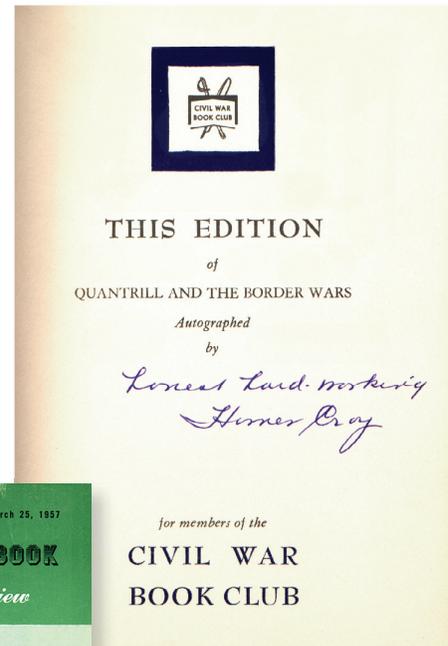
Marketing-savvy Newman, who of course was also an autograph dealer specializing in high-end Civil War and Lincolniana,

made CWBC titles desirable by having a special colophon (an identifying leaf used by printers or publishers) printed, signed by the book's author or editor and tipped in before the half-title page. Newman's large circle of friends within the world of Civil War studies facilitated the task of getting authors to sign stacks of colophon sheets. *Voila!* Instant collectible.

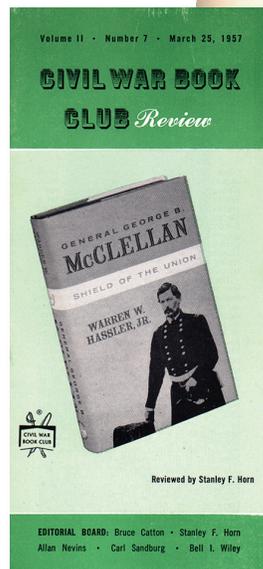
Newman also liked giving the CWBC editions names on this colophon leaf to differentiate them: Ruth Painter Randall's *Lincoln's Sons* is styled the "Heritage Edition," William Nathaniel Wood's *Reminiscences of Big I* is the "Rebel Shavetail Edition," A.D. Kirwan's *Johnny Green of the Orphan Brigade* is the "Chickamauga Edition," Sylvanus Cadwallader's *Three Years with Grant* is the "Wilderness Edition" and so on.

Fortunately for book and autograph collectors, the common wisdom among bibliophiles for detecting book club editions doesn't apply to CWBC editions. Book club editions, for those who don't collect books, almost never attain collectability and almost never attain more value than a reading copy. Whereas the first edition of some titles may take off in value, a book club edition will almost certainly never increase in value.

Detecting a book club edition can be done in a variety of ways. Often the book club bind embosses a small square or circle on the lower right corner of the rear cover, the front flap of the dust jacket does not have a price printed on the corner, the binding material is often different (paper over boards instead of cloth over boards), the height of the book itself is less, the paper is thinner and the ink is not a bold black. Experienced dealers can often detect a BOMC edition just by holding it in their hands.



Typical CWBC colophon, this one for William Elsey Connelley's *Quantrill and the Border Wars* (1956). Connelley (1855-1930) was long since dead when this edition was published, but author Homer Croy (1893-1965) wrote the introduction and signed this edition. Note that he adds "honest hard-working" above his signature.



The good news for autograph collectors is that many less-experienced booksellers see the phrase "Civil War Book Club" on the tipped-in leaf and assume it is a low-value reprint. Sometimes they price it accordingly, sometimes not. The internet is filled with CWBC titles for sale identified as "reprints," "later printings" and such—clearly many in the bookselling world are unaware the CWBC editions are legitimate first editions to which a signed sheet has been affixed.

I have yet to encounter or even hear of a Civil War Book Club title not authentically signed by its author or editor. CWBC editions are thus an extremely safe source for authentic signatures of well-known Civil War authors and historians. No bibliography or even informal checklist of its titles has ever been published. The Club probably petered out after 1965 when the Civil War centennial festivities ended. Autograph collectors should enjoy knowing about this little known and often misunderstood (and miscataloged) niche. ⚠️

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