

STEHEN CRANE : A BIOGRAPHY.

Born Nov. 1, 1871, Newark, N.J., U.S.

Died June 5, 1900, Badenweiler, Baden, Ger.

American novelist, poet, and short-story writer, best known for his novels *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) and *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) and the short stories "The Open Boat," "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky," and "The Blue Hotel."

Stephen's father, Jonathan Crane, was a Methodist minister who died in 1880, leaving Stephen, the youngest of 14 children, to be reared by his devout, strong-minded mother. After attending preparatory school at the Claverack College (1888–90), Crane spent less than two years at college and then went to New York City to live in a medical students' boardinghouse while freelancing his way to a literary career. While alternating bohemian student life and explorations of the Bowery slums with visits to genteel relatives in the country near Port Jervis, N.Y., Crane wrote his first book, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), a sympathetic study of an innocent and abused slum girl's descent into prostitution and her eventual suicide.

At that time so shocking that Crane published it under a pseudonym and at his own expense, *Maggie* left him to struggle as a poor and unknown freelance journalist, until he was befriended by Hamlin Garland and the influential critic William Dean Howells. Suddenly in 1895 the publication of *The Red Badge of Courage* and of his first book of poems, *The Black Riders*, brought him international fame. Strikingly different in tone and technique from *Maggie*, *The Red Badge of Courage* is a subtle impressionistic study of a young soldier trying to find reality amid the conflict of fierce warfare. The book's hero, Henry Fleming, survives his own fear, cowardice, and vainglory and goes on to discover courage, humility, and perhaps wisdom in the confused combat of an unnamed Civil War battle. Crane, who had as yet seen no war, was widely praised by veterans for his uncanny power to imagine and reproduce the sense of actual combat.

Crane's few remaining years were chaotic and personally disastrous. His unconventionality and his sympathy for the downtrodden aroused malicious gossip and false charges of drug addiction and Satanism that disgusted the fastidious author. His reputation as a war writer, his desire to see if he had guessed right about the psychology of combat, and his fascination with death and danger sent him to Greece and then to Cuba as a war correspondent.

His first attempt in 1897 to report on the insurrection in Cuba ended in near disaster; the ship *Commodore* on which he was traveling sank with \$5,000 worth of ammunition, and Crane—reported drowned—finally rowed into shore in a dinghy with the captain, cook, and oiler, Crane scuttling his money belt of gold before swimming through dangerous surf. The result was one of the world's great short stories, "The Open Boat."

Unable to get to Cuba, Crane went to Greece to report the Greco-Turkish War for the New York Journal. He was accompanied by Cora Taylor, a former brothel-house proprietor. At the end of the war they settled in England in a villa at Oxted, Surrey, and in April 1898 Crane departed to report the Spanish-American War in Cuba, first for the New York World and then for the New York Journal. When the war ended, Crane wrote the first draft of *Active Service*, a novel of the Greek war. He finally returned to Cora in England nine months after his departure and settled in a costly 14th-century manor house at Brede Place, Sussex. Here Cora, a silly woman with social and literary pretensions, contributed to Crane's ruin by encouraging his own social ambitions. They ruined themselves financially by entertaining hordes of spongers, as well as close literary friends—including Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, H.G. Wells, Henry James, and Robert Barr, who completed Crane's Irish romance *The O'Ruddy*.

Crane now fought a desperate battle against time, illness, and debts. Privation and exposure in his Bowery years and as a correspondent, together with an almost deliberate disregard for his health, probably hastened the disease that killed him at an early age. He died of tuberculosis that was compounded by the recurrent malarial fever he had caught in Cuba.

After *The Red Badge of Courage*, Crane's few attempts at the novel were of small importance, but he achieved an extraordinary mastery of the short story. He exploited youthful small-town experiences in *The Monster and Other Stories* (1899) and *Whilomville Stories* (1900); the Bowery again in *George's Mother* (1896); an early trip to the southwest and Mexico in "The Blue Hotel" and "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky"; the Civil War again in *The Little Regiment* (1896); and war correspondent experiences in *The Open Boat and Other Tales of Adventure* (1898) and *Wounds in the Rain* (1900). In the best of these tales Crane showed a rare ability to shape colourful settings, dramatic action, and perceptive characterization into ironic explorations of human nature and destiny. In even briefer scope, rhymeless, cadenced and "free" in form, his unique, flashing poetry was extended into *War Is Kind* (1899).

Stephen Crane first broke new ground in *Maggie*, which evinced an uncompromising (then considered sordid) realism that initiated the literary trend of the succeeding generations—i.e., the sociological novels of Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, and James T. Farrell. Crane intended *The Red Badge of Courage* to be "a psychological portrayal of fear," and reviewers rightly praised its psychological realism. The first non-romantic novel of the Civil War to attain widespread popularity, *The Red Badge of Courage* turned the tide of the prevailing convention about war fiction and established a new, if not unprecedented, one. The secret of Crane's success as war correspondent, journalist, novelist, short-story writer, and poet lay in his achieving tensions between irony and pity, illusion and reality, or the double mood of hope contradicted by despair. Crane was a great stylist and a master of the contradictory effect.