

TLC Showcase

RICHARD BUXTON

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Introduction to Whirligig

Setting my first novel, *Whirligig*, during the American Civil War was a natural fit for me. I already had an enduring passion and several shelves of books on the subject. Like the snake devouring itself, the writing feeds the interest and the interest feeds the writing. I had a particular fascination with the great struggle around Chattanooga and the divided loyalties of eastern Tennessee. In choosing a perspective through that history I use Shire, a young Englishman new to America and swept up in the war. I placed him in the 125th Ohio Volunteer Infantry, a regiment of renown in the battles that form part of the story. The extract is Shire's first scene as a union soldier. As an Englishman, he would be viewed as an outsider; always a useful device from which to build empathy. He has his own heartfelt mission, but increasingly becomes bound up in his commitment to his comrades and to the moral aspect of the war.

After completing my first draft, I flew to Chicago to start a road trip down into Tennessee and Georgia to visit the places that the 125th marched and fought. 'Detail is the lifeblood of fiction,' as John Gardner says, and my intention was to harvest as much as I could. I spent the first day at the Art Institute of Chicago. Escaping the crowded galleries, I found my way to the American folk exhibit and discovered my Whirligig. It was a five foot high collection of wooden cogs and sails, all painted red, white and blue, built to blow in the breeze for the entertainment of 19th century fair-goers. I knew right away I'd found something that would matter to the novel.

The Whirligig stayed in my mind as I drove south through the overt Americana of today. I began to see it as a metaphor for America past and present: this self-obsessed, driven, spinning machine. More than that, I began to see Shire caught up in this machine, a tiny English cog unknowingly influencing the whole. I invented the eponymous Whirligig Man, doggedly pushing his star-spangled whirligig from town to town, unaware that it represented a country which had lost faith with itself, which had come face to bloody face with the contradictions of its founding constitution.

After completing my Masters, I approached TLC as I felt I needed advice from inside the writing industry. The review by author Matthew Branton, and latterly working closely with wonderful editor Karl French, has boosted my confidence as well as greatly improved the novel.

The greatest joy for me when writing historical fiction, are those serendipitous collisions between the history, the research, and my imagination, which serve to expand or deepen the story. Although the novel explores America's sometimes hypocritical, sometimes heroic obsession with freedom, *Whirligig* remains at heart a quest story; an unasked for odyssey founded in love and attachment. I'm now busy with Shire's next odyssey (his and mine), *The Copper Road*.

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Whirligig, by Richard Buxton

Down on his luck not long after arriving in America, Shire has joined the newly formed 125th Ohio Infantry in Cleveland, hoping it will ultimately take him south to find his childhood friend Clara.

1862 – December – Camp Cleveland, Ohio

In the centre of the square, under the American flag, a loose halyard slapped the pole, out of rhythm with the swirling wind. The gritty snow, sharp as sand, had taken up residence in the air and sucked the colour from the scene. To Shire, the surrounding brown barrack huts, a tied bay mare, the blue uniforms, were all shaded towards grey. If ever the snow met the ground, it was soon collected into short-lived eddies and whipped back up to prickle his hands and face. He half closed his eyes against the sting, tried not to lick his cracked lips; it only made them colder. It still felt strange to be marching beneath that flag.

'Right face!' shouted Sergeant Bluffton.

The whole of Company B swivelled ninety degrees.

'Forward!'

Half the men – the 'ones' – stood still, while Shire – a heartbeat late – and the other designated 'twos', stepped forward and to the right of the man in front. The company was magically converted from two lines for battle into four lines of column.

'March!'

Step off with the left leg. Keep your distance constant to the man in front. Don't give Bluffton any excuse. Shire could feel the shape of his scar. The freezing wind defined it for him. The rest of his face was raw, a dull ache under the skin, but the scar itself felt wet. He recalled a kiss from his mother in some other life, long ago.

Could he call it a scar yet? Had it finished healing? At first the burn had wept a clear but constant discharge. But by the time he'd travelled with Dan from New York to his parents' home in Medina, Ohio, it had crusted red and yellow. He'd tried not to pick at it but it itched, inside and out, keeping fresh the memory of the burnt man,

twisting slowly above him. The scab had only yesterday come away completely, leaving a glassy red tear, the size of his thumbprint.

'Left wheel – march!'

Don't try to anticipate; Sergeant Bluffton mixes up the orders. This left wheel took them nonsensically at a barrack hut before a quick right wheel set them straight again. To think at all was ill-advised. Just drill until your body did whatever Bluffton said. March, turn, stop, present arms, march again and try to forget it was Christmas Eve.

A lone, lanky soldier was standing outside the commissary store, watching them. What was he about? Bluffton halted the men. The bay mare, tied outside the officers' mess, defecated wetly, steamy warmth wasting into the air.

'Fix bayonets!'

Shire pulled his bayonet from the sheath attached to his belt. His numb fingers vaguely registered the deeper cold of the barrel as he slipped the bayonet ring into place. Next to him Ned's older hands were slower still.

'Trail arms!'

Ned was last to get into position, but earned nothing more than a glare from Bluffton. He was supposed to look out for Shire, so Dan had said. Maybe Dan had intended it the other way around. It felt like that sometimes, though Ned had at least a dozen years on him. But it was good to have one friend at least, even if he was a bit broken.

'Shoulder arms!'

Dan had returned to New York the same day Shire had left for the army. Parting was almost like walking away from home again. Dan had been his only friend this side of the Atlantic, and would himself be back in Liverpool soon enough. Everyone who mattered was so far away. He imagined his friends at Ridgmont; the church with the nativity set out, the farm with the horses all stalled, the school empty for Christmas – Father alone at home.

No letters. He'd hoped one might have come through the shipping line, having left Dan's address with them for forwarding. It was hard sometimes to feel the same impetus with which he'd set out to keep his promise. He'd tried not to let this show

in his latest letter home. And he'd written that he'd enlisted for nine months, not for the three years which was the only option. The war couldn't last that long.

'Order arms!'

Three years. Fighting a war that wasn't his, to keep a promise made sitting in a tree when he was seven. He moved his rifle to his right hand and rested the butt beside his foot, holding the barrel lightly. A clatter of tin came from the kitchen hut, followed by some prize cursing. Bluffton scanned the line, daring anyone to so much as smile without his permission, then turned his back. Shire relaxed. At last he'd got through a drill without a mistake, despite his wandering mind. Perhaps that was the trick.

Someone behind kicked the butt of his rifle. Shire dropped it on the hard dirt. He heard laughter and spun round on a burst of anger. Cleves was wearing a stifled smile in his weasel face. Tom Muncie and Mason, both big men, stood either side of him. Mason made the slightest nod towards Cleves. Shire didn't need it – it was always bloody Cleves. When he turned back, Bluffton's face was barely an inch away, his brown beard almost up to his scowling eyes. Shire felt as if he was about to be mauled by some great bear. Though the bear would likely have had better breath.

'Why have they sent me this ass-backwards Englishman, who'd drop his piss-proud cock before breakfast if it wasn't so small?'

Spittle flecked Shire's cheeks and lip. He tried, but failed, not to flinch.

'Extra fatigue duty,' Bluffton spat. 'You must be getting good at digging latrine ditches. Let's see if you can hang onto a shovel better than a rifle.' The sergeant turned away.

More hours out in the cold. Shire picked up his rifle and wondered how many more weeks Cleves and Bluffton would keep this up.

The sergeant called over the soldier outside the commissary store. The tall man had no rifle and his uniform was too short, an inch of pale skin showed above his boots. He had an odd gait as he walked, rather than marched; his lower legs and forearms appearing to swing past the usual stopping point, as if a vital ligament was missing. He came to a stop, arms relaxed by his sides, slightly hunched as if he were sitting back on a fence rail.

'This one's from Kentucky,' said the sergeant to Company B. 'I don't know why we can't fill this company from Ohio, as it should be. And I don't know why this boy

hasn't seen fit to join up with his own kith and kin. What I do know is I ain't got the time to teach him the drill. Stand to attention, boy.'

The Kentuckian, untidy dark hair under an ill-fitting cap, straightened himself; though to Shire's eye it wasn't a stance that came naturally to the man. He gained two or three more inches in the process, a proportion of which translated to his trousers and showed off more skin.

The sergeant looked down. 'You planning on turnin' heads with those pretty white legs?'

There was laughter in the ranks.

'Commissary store didn't have a fit, sir. Said they'd see what they could do.'

'You address me as *Sergeant*. Corporal Lyman!'

'Sergeant?'

Amazing how the corporal could strip any hint of energy or enthusiasm from a single word.

'This man will replace Rittman in your section.'

Rittman had deserted with his sign-up money a week ago; bounty jumping they called it.

'You're to teach him the Manual of Arms and the drill.'

Lyman's heavy sigh didn't carry past Shire. 'Yes, Sergeant.'

'And take him back to the commissary hut and get him some gaiters or longer socks. Our Kentucky boy might be feeling the Ohio cold.'

There was more laughter, undampened by the sergeant. Shire smiled too. The new recruit was shown to the spare place in the section, immediately to Shire's right, still drawing amusement both on account of his height and trousers.

'Shoulder arms!'

He was keeping a neutral face, and Shire felt for him. But he was sick and tired of being the company's whipping boy. It was time for someone else to take a turn.

'Left face!'

The poor man was facing straight at him. Despite a nugget of guilt he couldn't quite escape, Shire broke into full-throated laughter along with the rest of Company B. He looked up at the hapless man, received a thin smile and a raised eyebrow. Only then did Shire realise the Kentuckian was facing the same way as everybody else.

Shire stepped in from the dark. The men in the closest bunks swore at him and told him to close the door. He welcomed the rank concoction of three dozen sweaty men. Anything to be inside where his hands wore the air like warmed gloves. He picked his way down the narrow space between the three-tiered bunks, squeezed past standing men and through their blown smoke, edged round those sat reading or writing. No one made it easy for him and no one had a pleasant word. He stepped over Cleves' leg as it predictably shot out to trip him and reached his bottom bunk at the far end. Someone's newspaper lay on his rucked-up blanket. He moved it to one side and sat down, held up his raw hands to inspect his blisters in the lamp-light.

'Hey, Shire,' said Corporal Lyman from above, 'would you mind going back out to take a shit for me?' Lyman's voice was as lazy as he was, never troubling itself to get up out of a low register. 'No point me getting frozen as well.'

Shire struggled to slip his coat off his stiff shoulders, then sat waiting for his hands to warm up so he could untie his muddy boots.

Ned was sitting on the middle bunk opposite, cleaning his own boots. He gave Shire a nod and jumped down. 'Give me your mug.' He took it and disappeared down the hut.

Tom Muncie was pointing his usual big smile at Shire, like a welcome home dog. There was no harm meant, but Shire picked up the paper rather than acknowledge him. *The Cleveland Leader* was a week old. In the second column there was a succession of headlines which anticipated the report below. *The Battle of Saturday, Rebel Works Almost Impregnable, Retreat a Military Necessity*. The battle, at somewhere called Fredericksburg in Virginia, had been a bad loss. There'd been papers in camp all week, but nobody had offered him one; he'd had to listen instead. At home, in their snug kitchen back in Emglad, he and Father had made a study of the war, *The Times* spread across the table.

'This paper's for sale, not for loan,' said Lyman, snatching the paper up to his bunk. 'Anyhow, it don't make encouraging reading for someone who can't hang on to a rifle.'

'And is my bunk for loan?' said Shire.

'It's the bottom bunk. Stands to reason we're gonna use it. 'Sides, you were out digging in the fresh air.'

'Looks like the Rebels were well dug-in if you read that report,' said Mason in his baritone from higher up.

There was a small commotion down the hut as two washer women entered and men handed over their dirty clothes. Shire fingered his own flannel shirt, stiff with mud, but was too exhausted to undress. Besides, who was there to dress well for tomorrow? Only Bluffton.

Ned returned and handed Shire his tin mug, half-filled with coffee, and sat down next to him. 'See that fella?' he said, for Shire's ears only. He motioned with his thumb at the next top bunk, where a pair of large feet in woollen socks extended well off the end. 'The new boy, from Kentucky. Reckon he won't stay longer than Rittman. He'll bounty jump for sure. Why else would he join an Ohio regiment? Probably already jumped in Kentucky. Man could get rich on that trade.'

'Only if he doesn't get shot for desertion,' said Shire.

'He don't say much. I'll bet you fifty cents he's gone before New Year.'

Ned made no move to return to his own bed and Shire struggled for something to say. Before he'd introduced them, Dan had told Shire how Ned had lost his farm in the spring, adjacent to Dan's own family, after Ned's wife and child had died of cholera. The farm belonged to his father-in-law who'd taken it back. It seemed a mean-spirited thing to do. So Ned was driven by necessity just like he was.

'You alright?' asked Ned, leaning a few inches closer than Shire was comfortable with.

'Thinking of home. Christmas . . . you know?'

Ned looked older than Dan had claimed. Maybe a year ago he'd have looked five years younger. His eyes seemed to look out at a world he was afraid of.

'Yeah . . . I'm trying not to think on it myself. Though I expect the colonel will have us out singing carols in a blizzard tomorrow.'

Shire's plan to become a substitute had gone awry. Dan's employer won him an exemption on the basis that he was helping to supply arms. So Shire had gone along with Ned and signed up as a straight volunteer. The sign-up money was three hundred dollars.

Ned leant closer. 'You got that money sewed up tight? I don't trust that quiet boy.'

Shire said he had. He'd sown half the money into the jacket lining of his new uniform, though he suspected probably half the company had done the same. He'd put the other half in the Phoenix Bank in Medina before coming on to Camp Cleveland with Ned.

A drummer set to practising at the other end of the hut, working through the signals until someone snapped and cursed him quiet.

Mason leant out over the top bunk to talk down to Lyman. 'I think Burnside will go after getting kicked out of Fredericksburg.'

'Probably,' said Lyman. 'Seems to be the way of it. New general, lost battle, fired general. Lincoln don't suffer fools.'

'Well I wish he saw them comin' more clearly. Perhaps we'll be shipped east to help out.'

Shire found he was rubbing his scar. If they went back east, he might as well have signed up in New York.

'Maybe,' said Lyman. 'No tellin' which way we're headed. But so long as there's a ready supply of fresh meat signin' up straight off the boat, I'm thinkin' we'll stay west. I don't know what business they had fightin' this late in the year. Armies didn't oughta fight in the winter. Reckon Shire's got until spring to learn to shoot straight.'

About the Writer

Richard Buxton was born in Buckinghamshire but transplanted to a farm in West Wales at the age of eight. During his second year at University in London, he was given the opportunity to spend a semester at the State University of New York. After graduating, he won the Elizabeth and Thomas Williams Scholarship, which allowed him to return to upstate New York to study for a Master's in International Relations at Syracuse University. It's no coincidence then, that Shire, the main protagonist in *Whirligig*, is a young Englishman experiencing America with a certain wide-eyed naivety. Granted, Richard's exposure was largely to American football and fraternity parties, whereas Shire's is to hardship, to riot and the tragedy of battle. Nevertheless, the sheer scale of America and its unrelenting energy is probably as evident now as it was then.



These days, Richard lives with his family in the South Downs but travels as often as he can to America for research and inspiration. Three years ago he took a step back from his IT career to complete the first draft of *Whirligig* and then to take a second Masters, this time in Creative Writing at Chichester University. He has enjoyed success in a number of areas since gaining his distinction at the end of 2014, being published for poetry, feature writing and short-stories.

In May 2015, Richard placed as runner-up in the Thresholds International Feature Competition with his essay about Louisiana author Tim Gautreaux. Soon after, *Little Round Top* was the winning entry in the June issue of Writers' Forum. The short story *His Last Day* was recently published in issue 8 of Alt Hist magazine and *Whirligig* was longlisted by the Historical Novel Society for their 2015 New Novel Award. Finally, in October 2015, Richard won the Exeter Short Story Award with *Battletown*.