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Civil War Collection Sold on Anniversary of Lee's Surrender

by Jeanne Schinto

Bloomsbury Auctions, New York City

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The Civil War collection of the late Douglas G. O'Dell was the featured attraction at the Civil War sale of Bloomsbury Auctions in New York City on April 9. For over 25 years, O'Dell, who died in March 2007 at age 53, was the proprietor of Chapel Hill Rare Books in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Considered one of the preeminent Civil War dealers in the country, O'Dell was also well known as a collector. The Confederacy was one of his specialties, particularly its published history and manuscript records. This sale reflected that concentration. Appropriately, it was scheduled to coincide with the 143rd anniversary of

Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox.

A rare copy of the final printing of the Confederate Constitution was a

keystone of O'Dell's collection. Only two other copies have appeared at auction in the past 41 years. One was the Thomas W. Streeter copy that Parke-Bernet sold in 1967; the other was Jay T. Snider's, offered by Christie's in 2005. O'Dell's copy belonged originally to Lyman Gibbons (1808-1879), delegate from Monroe County, Alabama, to the Confederate

Constitutional Convention. "It was 'as issued'—uncut, stitched together

—and it was signed three times," said Bloomsbury's specialist in charge,

Jeremy Markowitz, who identified its buyer as a private collector. It sold

for \$60,000 (including buyer's premium). An official facsimile printing of South Carolina's Act of Secession was another of O'Dell's rarities. The broadside, one of the earliest imprints of the Confederacy, sold to a private collector for \$50,400. According to Bloomsbury's research, only two other copies have appeared at auction in the past quarter century. Two hundred copies of the large (approximately 34" x 30") lithograph were made in 1861. Evans and Cogswell of Charleston, the lithographers assigned the task, were so intent on creating an exact likeness of this critical document, they even reproduced

O'Dell also owned important letters written by Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and other generals from both sides of the conflict. They tell of strategies; they give marching orders. An early one, written by Jackson in 1862, directs D.H. Hill to the Battle of Fredericksburg. Exceedingly clean and with good content, it sold for \$18,000 to the trade.

the ink blots found on the original.

Some letters were written just after the war. A touching one by Lee in 1869 thanked William G. Bullock for the gift of a beaver fur robe and sympathized with the loss of his son, John Washington Bullock (1840-1863), a Confederate officer. It sold to the trade for \$11,400.

Three documents relating to J.E. Johnston's surrender to William T. Sherman sold as one lot to a private collector for \$20,400. One document was an official copy of another, so the buyer essentially got "two for the price of one," in Markowitz's words. The third item was a circular concerning the confiscation of ammunition and accoutrements and the logistics of field transportation. The O'Dell collection was unusually heavy with broadsides printed on

poor-quality paper, crudely printed material done on field presses, and "wallpaper newspapers," so—called because they were printed on the reverse of wallpaper samples. These relics of "necessity printing" testaments to the ingenuity of the South in the face of paper shortages during the war—are naturally scarce. Some are unrecorded. An unrecorded "extra" from the Rockingham Register, reporting the

victory at Second Manassas, sold for \$2640. An apparently unrecorded Confederate handbill, claiming victory at the Battle of the Wilderness, sold for \$2880. Two rare Confederate playbills, published in the Union prison at Johnson Island, Ohio, advertising dramas scripted and acted by inmates, sold for \$4320. A very rare copy of The Vidette, a Confederate camp newspaper published "Semi-Occasionally" for John Hunt Morgan's Raiders, brought \$6600. The cover illustration of Bloomsbury's sumptuous catalog for this 215-

lot sale turned out to represent the top lot of the day, a copy of the conflict's most famous pictorial record, Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the War. It sold to a private collector for \$156,000. The auction house said it was a record price. Conceived by Alexander Gardner (1821-1882) as a two-volume record of

100 photographs accompanied by text written by Gardner, it was published by Philp & Solomons, Washington, D.C., in 1865-66. Originally intended for the carriage trade and priced at \$150, the book was a commercial failure at first. Gradually, Gardner's remarkable achievement began to be understood. The market for complete original copies like O'Dell's is competitive

(www.artfact.com) listed only one other at auction recently. Offered by Sotheby's on October 17, 2003, it sold for \$79,200. They are scarce in any case because no more than 200 copies were made. Condition of this iconic book is sometimes an issue. "Generally, the images fade; they get heavily foxed; the binding breaks," said Markowitz.

because so many have been broken up over the years. Artfact

"This one was in the original binding, restored, and internally it was also pretty good." In 2007, when Markowitz was an expert at Swann, he very successfully sold O'Dell's collection of Civil War regimentals-i.e., unit histories. Once

again, with this sale, the estate was extremely pleased, he said. "The sale really reflected Doug's taste and skill as a Civil War collector, dealer, and historian. He had a really good eye, and the material showed that. There were times when the material in the sale did at or above his retail price. You can't do any better." Markowitz's trademark catalog descriptions, complete and highly

one or two at most to a page. "It was also a fun sale, well attended by lots of different people," Markowitz said. "Overall, the number of private collectors and

detailed, surely contributed to that success. So did large full-color photos,

sale." Asked whose idea it was to have the auction fall on the anniversary of the surrender, Markowitz said, "It was mine. I also found out after the fact that it happened to be Doug's birthday, so it was a real celebration."

institutions buying in the sale was way above usual for an Americana

Bloomsbury has celebrated other achievements in recent months, one being that 2007 was the company's most successful year. A press release notes a 90% increase in income. The opening series of sales at its fledgling New York City salesroom, totaling \$6.15 million, was part of that equation. So were two "white-glove" sales in London. A white-glove sale

designates an auction where every lot finds a buyer, and, according to tradition, the auctioneer is awarded a pair of white gloves. White gloves aren't the usual accessory at Bloomsbury, which clearly strives for a young, hip, unstuffy image. That strategy can't hurt in attracting new collectors. Upcoming sales have intriguing themes and titles, such as "Great People, Great Moments," "Memories of

words "Modern" and "Contemporary." For more information, contact the auction house at (212) 719-1000 or see the Web site (www.bloomsburyauctions.com).

Childhood," and "Explorers and Travelers." Several subtitles include the

The University of California Press has published On Alexander Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the Civil War by Anthony W. Lee and Elizabeth Young. The first in a

More on Gardner

new series called "Defining Moments in American Photography," the small (approximately 8" x 6") volume reproduces 27 of the photographs and discusses them in two essays. Lee, an art historian, writes about the images; Young, a literary scholar, writes about Gardner's descriptive texts. The cover shows A Burial Party,

Cold Harbor, Va., 1865, picturing African-American men assigned to gather and bury the remains of soldiers killed in battles there in 1862 and 1864. According to Lee, Gardner's opus, besides being a seminal document of the Civil War, also stands as "a foundational volume in the

history of American photography, the first book to rely so heavily on pictures for its meanings." The book is \$50, hardbound; \$19.95, softbound; 128 pages, with 27 duotones. To order, contact the University of California Press

(www.ucpress.edu); or California- Princeton Fulfillment Services, 1445

Lower Ferry Road, Ewing, NJ 08618, (800) 777-4726.

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