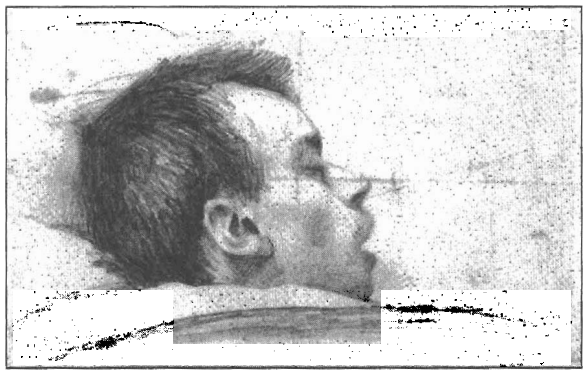

Wilky James recovering from wounds received in the attack on Fort Wagner, 1863. (Drawing by William James.)

THE METAPHYSICAL CLUB

LOUIS MENAND

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

NEW YORK

CONTENTS

Preface

PART ONE

ONE The Politics of Slavery 3
TWO The Abolitionist 23
THREE The Wilderness and After 49

PART TWO

FOUR The Man of Two Minds 73
FIVE Agassiz 97
SIX Brazil 117

PART THREE

SEVEN The Peirces 151
EIGHT The Law of Errors 177
NINE The Metaphysical Club 201

Part Four

TEN Burlington 235
ELEVEN Baltimore 255
TWELVE Chicago 285

Part Five

THIRTEEN Pragmatisms 337
FOURTEEN Pluralisms 377
FIFTEEN Freedoms 409

Epilogue 435

Acknowledgments 443
Notes 447
Works Cited 499
Index 521

PART FOUR

TEN Burlington 235
ELEVEN Baltimore 255
TWELVE Chicago 285

PART FIVE

THIRTEEN Pragmatisms 337
FOURTEEN Pluralisms 377
FIFTEEN Freedoms 409

Epilogue 435

Acknowledgments 443
Notes 447
Works Cited 499
Index 521

PREFACE

IT IS A REMARKABLE FACT about the United States that it fought a civil war without undergoing a change in its form of government. The Constitution was not abandoned during the American Civil War; elections were not suspended; there was no coup d'état. The war was fought to preserve the system of government that had been established at the nation's founding—to prove, in fact, that the system was worth preserving, that the idea of democracy had not failed. This is the meaning of the Gettysburg Address and of the great fighting cry of the North: "Union." And the system was preserved; the union did survive. But in almost every other respect, the United States became a different country. The war alone did not make America modern, but the war marks the birth of modern America.

As a political and economic event, the transformation is not hard to see or difficult to explain. Secession allowed the North, for four years, to set the terms for national expansion without interference from the South, and the wartime Congress did not let the opportunity slip. That Congress was one of the most active in American history. It supported scientific training and research; it established the

first system of national taxation and created the first significant national currency; it made possible the construction of public universities and the completion of the transcontinental railway. It turned the federal government into the legislative engine of social and economic progress. And it helped to win a war. The military defeat of the Confederacy made the Republican Party the dominant force in national politics after 1865, and the Republican Party was the champion of business. For more than thirty years, a strong central government protected and promoted the ascendance of industrial capitalism and the way of life associated with it—the way of life we call "modern."

To this extent, the outcome of the Civil War was a validation, as Lincoln had hoped it would be, of the American experiment. Except for one thing, which is that people who live in democratic societies are not supposed to settle their disagreements by killing one another. For the generation that lived through it, the Civil War was a terrible and traumatic experience. It tore a hole in their lives. To some of them, the war seemed not just a failure of democracy, but a failure of culture, a failure of ideas. As traumatic wars do—as the First World War would do for many Europeans sixty years later, and as the Vietnam War would do for many Americans a hundred years later—the Civil War discredited the beliefs and assumptions of the era that preceded it. Those beliefs had not prevented the country from going to war; they had not prepared it for the astonishing violence the war unleashed; they seemed absurdly obsolete in the new, postwar world. The Civil War swept away the slave civilization of the South, but it swept away almost the whole intellectual culture of the North along with it. It took nearly half a century for the United States to develop a culture to replace it, to find a set of ideas, and a way of thinking, that would help people cope with the conditions of modern life. That struggle is the subject of this book.

There are many paths through this story. The one that is followed here runs through the lives of four people: Oliver Wendell Holmes, William James, Charles S. Peirce, and John Dewey. These people had highly distinctive personalities, and they did not always agree with one another, but their careers intersected at many points, and together they were more responsible than any other group for moving

American thought into the modern world. They not only had an unparalleled influence on other writers and thinkers; they had an enormous influence on American life. Their ideas changed the way Americans thought—and continue to think—about education, democracy, liberty, justice, and tolerance. And as a consequence, they changed the way Americans live—the way they learn, the way they express their views, the way they understand themselves, and the way they treat people who are different from themselves. We are still living, to a great extent, in a country these thinkers helped to make.[1]

Within this claim for the importance of Holmes, James, Peirce, and Dewey and the work they did, there is a point about the nature of intellectual culture. It is a point, in fact, which is very much a part of their legacy. There is a difference between an idea and an ideology. The suggestion that Holmes, James, Peirce, and Dewey were the first modern thinkers in the United States—that they helped put Americans into a better relation with the conditions of modern life—does not mean that their thought constituted a justification of those conditions. It did not. But it cannot be said that their thought stands in radical opposition to those conditions, either. If we are looking for alternative visions of American life in the decades following the Civil War, Holmes, James, Peirce, and Dewey are not the figures we would turn to. This has something to do, no doubt, with their temperaments and their politics, but it is also a consequence of their attitude toward ideas.

What was that attitude? If we strain out the differences, personal and philosophical, they had with one another, we can say that what these four thinkers had in common was not a group of ideas, but a single idea—an idea about ideas. They all believed that ideas are not "out there" waiting to be discovered, but are tools—like forks and knives and microchips—that people devise to cope with the world in which they find themselves. They believed that ideas are produced not by individuals, but by groups of individuals—that ideas are social. They believed that ideas do not develop according to some inner logic of their own, but are entirely dependent, like germs, on their human carriers and the environment. And they believed that since

ideas are provisional responses to particular and unreproducible circumstances, their survival depends not on their immutability but on their adaptability.

The belief that ideas should never become ideologies—either justifying the status quo, or dictating some transcendent imperative for renouncing it—was the essence of what they taught. In many ways this was a liberating attitude, and it accounts for the popularity Holmes, James, and Dewey (Peirce is a special case) enjoyed in their lifetimes, and for the effect they had on a whole generation of judges, teachers, journalists, philosophers, psychologists, social scientists, law professors, and even poets. They taught a kind of skepticism that helped people cope with life in a heterogeneous, industrialized, mass-market society, a society in which older human bonds of custom and community seemed to have become attenuated, and to have been replaced by more impersonal networks of obligation and authority. But skepticism is also one of the qualities that make societies like that work. It is what permits the continual state of upheaval that capitalism thrives on. Holmes, James, Peirce, and Dewey helped to free thought from thralldom to official ideologies, of the church or the state or even the academy. There is also, though, implicit in what they wrote, a recognition of the limits of what thought can do in the struggle to increase human happiness.

This book is an effort to write about these ideas in their own spirit—that is, to try to see ideas as always soaked through by the personal and social situations in which we find them. Holmes, James, Peirce, and Dewey were philosophers, and their work is part of the history of abstract thought. Its philosophical merits were contested in its own time, and they are contested today. This book is not a work of philosophical argument, though; it is a work of historical interpretation. It describes a change in American life by looking at a change in its intellectual assumptions. Those assumptions changed because the country became a different place. As with every change, there was gain and there was loss. This story, if it has been told in the right way, should help make possible a better measure of both.

PART ONE