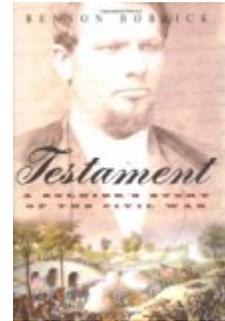


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Benson Bobrick.** *Testament: A Soldier's Story of the Civil War.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003. 277 pp. \$23.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7432-5091-7.

Reviewed by Todd Kerstetter (History Department, Texas Christian University)  
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## Serving Two Masters, Telling Two Tales

The title's soldier, Benjamin W. ("Webb") Baker, found himself transported by his Union army service from Illinois to a host of fascinating, dangerous, and even tedious places during the Civil War. Baker wrote home regularly about his experiences and his family did history students a service by saving his correspondence. His great-grandson, Columbia-educated author Benson Bobrick, who has written books on topics ranging from the Russian conquest of Siberia to the King James Bible to the American Revolution, harnessed the collected letters to treat the Civil War. The product simultaneously recounts the war from Baker's common soldier perspective and chronicles the Western Theater in which he served.

When the war started, the teen-aged Baker lived with his family on its farm in central Illinois. He answered one of President Lincoln's earliest calls for troops by volunteering at age 19, which landed him in Company E of the 25th Illinois Regiment of Voluntary Infantry. Baker fought at Pea Ridge, Arkansas, where he was shot twice; Perryville, Kentucky, where his brother was killed in combat; and Chickamauga, Georgia, where he was wounded again. He also fought at Stones River, Tennessee, and marched on Atlanta with Sherman. Baker's service ended with his discharge during the summer of 1864 with his regiment at Atlanta's outskirts. The narrative's final eight pages follow his postwar life, which included farming, earning a doctorate in history, becoming a Methodist minister, and serving as president of Chad-dock College in Quincy, Illinois, and Missouri Wesleyan, in Cameron, before his death in 1909.

Benson Bobrick uses Baker's letters masterfully to provide interesting insights into a common Union soldier's life. For instance, a letter dated March 17, 1862, showed how Baker conceived of the struggle in religious terms. He called Dixie "a land of heathendom" and referred to the North, specifically Illinois, as "God's land" (p. 69). The letters also reflect the boredom, passion, and grief soldiers felt during their service. One of the most touching episodes plays out in Baker's letter to his mother explaining the circumstances of his brother's (her son's) death in combat at Perryville, Kentucky, in October 1862. Although Baker and his letters sometimes disappear for lengthy segments of the narrative while Bobrick narrates other events to provide context, his words give vivid accounts of battle and daily life that puts the reader squarely in a soldier's boots. Baker's account of how troops received news of the emancipation proclamation—some celebrated, some resented the shift in the war's meaning, some deserted—makes excellent reading, too. For readers who want more of Baker's letters than the narrative provides, Bobrick includes the full text of all in a fifty-seven-page appendix. Bobrick's lively prose and useful, clearly rendered maps fall into the book's asset column, but Baker's letters are its real strength and contribution to the field.

The book's chief liability rests in its split personality. Is it Baker's biography or a history of the Western Theater? This reader wanted to learn more about Baker and wishes Bobrick had expanded the biographical elements. The larger military story draws heavily on works by Shelby Foote and Bruce Catton. Those interested in

that element would be served better by consulting the originals. Readers well versed in Civil War literature will probably find little new here. Overall, the strength of Baker's letters outweighs the book's shortcomings and Bobrick's concise, engaging presentation make this soldier's story one worth visiting.

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