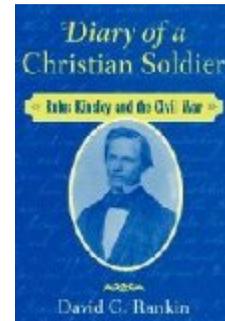


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David C. Rankin. *Diary of a Christian Soldier: Rufus Kinsley and the Civil War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xxi + 281 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-82334-0.

Reviewed by Don Wickman (Librarian/Archivist, Woodstock Historical Society)
Published on H-CivWar (August, 2004)



A Man of Many Values

In the world of Civil War publishing, the quantity of material regarding the 180,000 African-Americans who fought in the conflict has represented a small percentage of the total volume. When new sources appear they deserve to be recognized for adding to the scholarship on minorities in the war. *Diary of a Christian Soldier: Rufus Kinsley and the Civil War* assists in filling that void providing the candid perspective of a white officer serving in a United States Colored regiment.

The Vermont-born Kinsley first worked on the family farm in the northern part of the state before travelling to Boston to learn the printer's trade. While a resident of that city he became strongly involved in the abolitionist movement, a value he carried with him throughout the Civil War. After the war erupted, the thirty-year-old Kinsley returned to Vermont and enlisted in the 8th Vermont Regiment, a unit destined to serve in Louisiana under the command of General Benjamin Butler. He soon received a promotion to corporal. While a member of the 8th Vermont he saw action in several minor engagements, but served primarily on detached duty as both a printer and assisting in the education of freed slaves. Eventually, he was rewarded with a surprise promotion to lieutenant in the 2nd Louisiana Native Guards, a regiment later designated the 74th United States Colored Troops. Except for a short period where the regiment found itself involved with the campaign outside Mobile, Alabama in 1864, the unit was stationed on Ship Island and the surrounding islands off the Mississippi coast in the Gulf of Mexico. As a man with strong abolitionist views, Kinsley did not fit the normal mold of an officer

in a colored regiment as detailed in Joseph T. Glatthaar's fine study *Forged in Battle*. According to Glatthaar, commitment to "uplifting the black race" proved secondary in attracting volunteers, when compared to ending the war, promotion and money. Kinsley was more the exception than the rule.

Kinsley maintained a diary throughout his military service with both the 8th Vermont and the colored troops. The strength of Kinsley's diary lies in the fact it was not written in typical period pocket-diary style. Space in those journals often limited the amount of daily information that could be recorded. In Kinsley's case, he composed his entries in a notebook, periodically missing some dates, but being able to record events and feelings in great detail. In this manner, not only does the reader better comprehend what occurred, but more of the rationale behind it. Also, Kinsley expressed himself well, a skill evidently gained from his earlier work experiences. This feature further enhances the daily entries. As a writer, he could be blunt, colorful, descriptive, and weave a line of subtle sarcasm. One distinct theme continued throughout his writings; Kinsley never swayed from his views of Christianity, abolitionism, slavery and temperance. The writer's words are the strength of the book and he paints a picture of life in the ranks of both enlisted man and officer.

On leaving his home state on March 6, 1862, Kinsley could have represented the thousands of similar Vermonters going off to war when he wrote, "Good bye, my father, friends, and home. Good bye, my native state. Shall

I ever see your lofty hills and fertile vales, your limpid lakes and streams? I hope I may" (p. 88).

As he and his comrades witness their first glimpses of porpoises on their voyage southwards, he provided a view of the soldiers from the mammals' perspective. "Schools of porpoise, highly tickled at sight of the Yankees, who looked, in their blueish hats and blueish green coats, as they were sprawling around the decks and hanging over the rails, quite like a cargo of overgrown bullfrogs" (p. 89).

Kinsley's opinions on slavery always took precedence. When managing a contraband camp, he witnessed on September 28, 1862, "At Church again with the Contrabands. Most of them know more Scripture than half the Yankees, notwithstanding they can not read a word. But they *never forget anything*" (p. 109). And with the announcement of the Emancipation Proclamation, he rejoiced with words of praise. "Thank God, the word has at last been spoken. Light begins to break through. Let the sons of earth rejoice. Sing paeans to Liberty. Let tyranny die" (p. 110).

The writer exhibited no pity for the South, firmly convinced that whatever damage inflicted on the home territory was proper penance. When Kinsley visited the Louisiana village of Thibodaux on January 21, 1863 he wrote, "the South is being burned with fire, and drowned in blood. Her villages are desolate, her lands, the richest in the world, laid waste, the wings of commerce idle, all her interests, material, social, political, tied to the hideous monster—Slavery—which is marching with rapid strides to its death" (p. 119). One can easily understand the entry of "Vengeance is mine; I will repay saith the Lord" (p. 146) written on April 18, 1864 when word reached Kinsley of the Fort Pillow massacre. For this Northerner, little compassion existed except with the population of ex-slaves.

Kinsley spared no words regarding his fellow officers in the regiment. When a fellow 8th Vermont soldier joined Kinsley's colored regiment as an officer, he re-

lated, "he is a good man, and I am sure he has back-bone enough to resist the importunities of his fellow officers who will constantly besiege him to worship with them at the shrine of Bacchus" (p. 145). The drinking and lack of Christian values among his fellow officers proved a constant point of agitation for Kinsley and certainly failed to win him many friends in the regiment.

The book is divided into three distinct sections: a lengthy biographical essay on Kinsley's life, the diary and a set of detailed endnotes. In some sections of the biography and notes, almost too much information is provided and within the notes some material is duplicated. A few errors arise in the text. For example, Burlington is incorrectly included into Franklin County when it belongs to Chittenden County (p. 16), and John W. Phelps is misrepresented as a brigadier general with the 1st Vermont Regiment, when actually he was the unit's colonel and subsequently promoted (p. 28). A strong point in the biographical essay is how important Kinsley regarded his military experience. No matter what he accomplished before and after the war, his service took priority. For him, the Civil War was his life's achievement.

The only major weakness of this publication is the shortage of maps. The book contains only one map that illustrates the Gulf of Mexico region. For those not familiar with Vermont, this is a glaring problem as the author makes reference to assorted communities throughout the state. Additional maps of the bayou region of Louisiana, Ship and Cat Island and Mobile Bay would have provided better perspective of Kinsley's travels throughout the South.

Such a weakness is trivial when considering the scope of the book. Rankin has done an admirable amount of research assisted by materials provided by Kinsley descendants. Rufus Kinsley's diary offers an insight into a region not often covered in Civil War writing, the experiences of slaves becoming freedmen and the inner world of being an officer in a Civil War regiment. War was not all glory. Readers will enjoy Kinsley's candor as they read of his wartime experiences.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

Citation: Don Wickman. Review of Rankin, David C., *Diary of a Christian Soldier: Rufus Kinsley and the Civil War*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. August, 2004.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11086>

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.