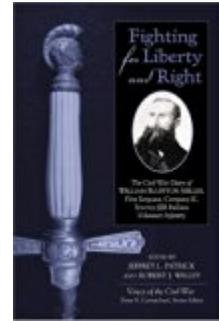


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jefferson L. Patrick, Robert J. Willey, eds. *Fighting for Liberty and Right: The Civil War Diary of William Bluffton Miller, First Sergeant, Company K, Seventy-Fifth Indiana Volunteer Infantry*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005. xiii + 448 pp. \$42.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57233-329-1.

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William Miller was born in Bluffton, Wells County, in northeastern Indiana, on June 4, 1839. He was thought to be the first white child born in the county. By the late 1850s he was working as a deputy to his father, the local sheriff. On June 14, 1860, he married Melissa Karns, who usually went by the nickname of Nett. Thereafter, William earned money as a carpenter.

On July 25, 1862, he enrolled in Company K of the 75th regiment, and spent the next two weeks trying to help recruit others. By mid-August he and his comrades showed up for duty in Indianapolis, and were provided with precious little training before heading for Kentucky. Miller's diary is very useful for capturing the early and immediate reactions of the raw recruit. On October 1, 1862, he wrote: "This is our first days march. We Started early and took the road towards Elizabeth Town and traveled about twenty miles.... I was tiard and Sick and could not eat anything. My feet is also very sore but I think I will be all right in the morning. I am not accustomed even to walking any distance" (p. 28). If anything, conditions were worse by October 26: "We marched nineteen miles and the snow made it slippery, and wet our feet, and we could not sit down when we stopped to rest and lots of our Boys gave out. We camped after dark and had to build fires to dry the ground before we could lye down to sleep. If ever I was tiard in my life it is to night. I don't know how I will Stand it through, as I am Sick and many such marches will kill a well man" (p. 34).

By December 12, 1862, he secured some respite from continual marching and inspections by being assigned as a hospital steward near Gallatin, Tennessee. The sick and wounded were housed in a local Presbyterian church, and

he noted: "[H]ere I find about two hundred Sick men. Several dead men and some dyeing. They are lying on the floor with nothing under them but a single blanket and their knapsacks for Pillows. Imagine if you can a man too Sick to help himself and no one to help him" (p. 48). This would not be the last time that Miller demonstrated a good deal of empathy for his fellow soldiers, both Union and Confederate.

He served in the hospital between December 12, 1862, and March 12, 1863. He was often the only one in his ward to comfort the dying, write letters to relatives and encourage those seeking to recover. On December 21 he observed: "Our principal diseases are chronic dioreah, Typhoid and Lung Fever and some cases of Rheumatism caused from exposure and laying on the Ground. Some have nothing else but homesickness and it is the worst disease to manage. They seem to go down in spite of all medical Treatment and die" (p. 48).

Back with his regiment, Miller had to participate in all of the routine of common soldiers. On March 24, 1863, he recorded: "This is just the kind of a [rainy] night that requires Sentinals to keep Vigilant watch. I found Jim Martin of 'Company G' asleep on his post. I took his gun. I had to approach him carefully and get the advantage of him before wakeing him up for fear in his fright he would use his gun on me thinking I was a 'Johnny Rebb.' But I wrenched his gun from him. I did not report him. He would be liable to Court Martial" (p. 77).

Like most soldiers, North and South, he devoted much effort over the years to foraging for food and fuel. Typical was an entry for November 23, 1862: "[W]ent out into the country. We were foraging for something

to eat but found there was nothing to get. We found some walnuts and chestnuts and pecimmons. We found marks of war all round and the people are destitute. Their Stock and produce has all been seized by one or the other Army” (p. 39).

Miller took time to look around as he marched or struck camp, and to commit such reactions to his diary. While in Kentucky he wrote on October 30, 1862: “I have noticed so far that there is no school houses in this State, outside of the towns as we have not seen any. I find that the people have hardly any education. But few can read and write” (p. 35). On July 21, 1864, near Atlanta he took time to ponder the reactions of those within this most important of Southern towns. “I wonder what can be the feelings of the inhabitants when they hear the Boom of cannon and know that it is a warning of the impending doom of their city and know that they are powerless to prevent it” (p. 232).

In between such ponderings, Miller devotes much space to the routine of military life. Not everything was grim. On August 23, 1863, while camped near the Chickamauga River, the soldiers often took chips of granite and polished them into gem-like trinkets and jewelry for their families back home. “Then it whiles away the tedious camp life and is a source of recreation for body and mind. This is a nice warm day but we have a nice mountain breeze nearly all the time” (pp. 125-26). Nostalgia could set in, however, such as on Christmas Eve, 1863: “This being Christmas Eve my stocking should be hung up but I don’t think there would be anything put in it as Santa Clause is afraid to come here” (p. 172).

Thoughts of home were ever-present, especially in times of sorrow. When William left for the war his son, Rollie, was only six months old. “I received Netts letter of August 2nd [1863] informing that Rollie was very sick of Flux.... I feel to night as though I would give anything to be at home. I am very sad and lonely. I can stand it very well if my folks keep well. It has been so long since I seen my little family that I almost forget how they look” (p. 126). Rollie died on August 4, and a few days later William heard the dreadful news. “Oh the anguish and sorrow I feel to night. One year ago today I left my dear wife and Baby ... with the fond anticipations of pleasure when I should return to them when peace reigned supreme. But now my Baby has passed away and I shall never see him more and then to know that my wife is left alone” (p. 127). On November 2, 1864, another blow from home fell upon him: “I learned that mother died October 24th. It was very unexpected as I did not know she was

dangerously Sick. It is sad news to me for the last time I seen her or heard her gentle voice rushes back to me and now to think I will never see her any more” (p. 269).

Miller had the typical contempt for officers shared by most non-coms. On August 10, 1863, he recorded that, “The officers don’t intend we shall get dirty as we have from one to two inspections daily. Some of them know about as much about a gun as a hog does about war but they can put on the Style all the same” (p. 127). There was, however, one officer, a fellow Hoosier, whom Miller much respected. That was Maj.Gen. Joseph J. Reynolds, Chief of Staff for Maj. Gen. William S. Rosecrans, commander of the Army of the Cumberland. “He is a nice friendly old gentleman.” No doubt the general would have appreciated the compliment, but not the description of “old” at the age of 41. Miller went on to write of Reynolds: “He does not think it a disgrace to talk to a private soldier like a dog and are here only for them to domineer over and that accounts in a great measure for the feeling existing between the rank and file. The private soldier does his duty many times because he is compelled to. Not with the free good will that he would if treated as a white man should be” (p. 93).

One of the disappointments about this diary is that Miller saw so little action. Only ten months after he enlisted could he report on June 25, 1863: “The skirmishing commenced at day light and I Shot at a man for the first time in my life and had the same compliment returned” (p. 103). It was not till the battle of Chickamauga on September 19, 1863, that he found himself in the thick of things. “This has been a terrible day to the American Nation and many bitter tears will be shed North and South for the dead of Chickamauga. There are thousands of men in the prime of life who this morning thought they were destined to live to a ripe old age who to night are lying on the Battle Field stark and stiff and who will be covered where they fell with a few shovels full of dirt and left to rot with nothing to mark the place where a hero perished for his country and that the government might live” (p. 145). However, there was indeed a personal element to this day. “The Battle raged all day without ceasing, until about 5 oclock when I was struck by a Minnie Ball passing through my right thigh and lodgeing in my left one. It did not fracture the bone or knock me down but disabled me so I could not walk. When it first struck me I did not think I was seriously hurt.... I managed to get back and Surgeon Dixon of the First Kentucky dressed it and ordered me off the field. I hobbled back and kept from being captured” (p. 145).

Little did Miller realize how much this injury would shape the rest of his military service. It took a long time till he could be up and about on crutches, and finally in early November, 1863, he was granted a furlough to go home. From November 9 to November 30 he relaxed with his wife and his parents, got together with old friends and gladly endured all manner of receptions, dinners, and conversations. The one thing that angered him greatly, however, was the attitude of many Democrats, who complained about how the Lincoln administration was running the war. On all too many occasions, Miller wanted to tell these Copperheads to stop hiding behind the lines and go join the Confederate Army.

Miller finally caught up with his regiment in mid-December, but was still unfit for marching and other duties of front-line service. He was co-opted into clerical work at the brigade and division levels, and to all intents and purposes spent the rest of the war as an orderly. In this sense, then, he was more of an observer than a participant in combat. We see this at the siege of Atlanta on September 1, 1864, from the vantage point of being on horseback and well removed from the actual fighting. Often he is reduced to recording in his diary the various rumors of the day, since he is stationed behind the lines. Typical of this was the entry for June 15, 1864. "There is the rumor that my division done some heavy fighting on Monday and lost heavy but I cant learn any particulars as to where or what the casualties are. There was a number of Rebel prisoners brought in but the news is not very reliable from the front" (p. 217).

Miller was continually with Sherman's Army as it marched to the sea, and then turned northward through South Carolina and North Carolina. On April 28, 1865, he learned of General Joseph Johnston's capitulation, which seemed to signal the final end to the war. "This day will long be remembered as the day on which we realized for the first time that our bloody work was over by drawing off from the front and making the first move to go home. We have longed for this day and to night for the first time in nearly three years we lay down with the assurance that to morrow will not bring forth a bloody battle and that our lives are our own. We bid farewell to our less fortunate comrades who Sleep the sleep of the martyr to their country. We go home to lay down our arms and resume our places in the ranks of citizens and our several occupations" (p. 337). Miller also spared a thought for the Rebel soldiers returning home: "[B]ut how different they will find it to what we will. Their homes are desolated and we return to land of plenty. Although I met them on the

Battle Field and helped lay waste their country, my heart goes out to them in sympathy for them" (pp. 337-338).

On May 19, 1865, Miller was among Sherman's troops who carried out the grand march down Pennsylvania Avenue, and soon he could quit Washington and make his way back home. Miller and his wife eventually had three children, and he was allowed to live out his long life. Finally settling in Charleston, Illinois, he died on May 29, 1918, in the midst of another American war.

There are two main problems with this diary. First, most of it is tedious reading. I have endeavored to pick out some of the highlights, but there are so many pages devoted to the same tedious routine of military life. The editors did exclude some repetitions but a case could be made for reducing the bulk of the volume by at least a third.

The second problem is more problematic. Miller's original pocket diaries did not survive his lifetime. Instead we have a transcript which the soldier compiled himself during the 1870s and 1880s. No doubt this was infinitely easier to read when it came time to preparing this edition, but, as a criminologist might say, the chain of custody has been broken. How much did Miller change or omit in the process of creating his later transcript? The editors think little of significance was either omitted or altered, but I am less sanguine. For instance, Miller usually mentioned in his diary whether or not he had received a letter from his wife or wrote one to her. What is so striking is that, almost invariably, he never summarizes such letters or characterizes their mood. One cannot help but think that Miller intentionally left out any really personal insights that could be derived by the many letters to and from husband and wife. As a result one has absolutely no idea of what his wife was thinking or doing or saying to her soldier husband.

A final word about the editing of the diary. Patrick and Willey have done a splendid job of putting the entries into perspective by providing introductory sections to each chapter. Thus, we the readers can immediately relate Miller's comments and descriptions to the broader picture of events going on at any given time.

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