

# H-Net Reviews

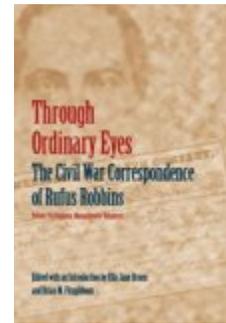
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Rufus Robbins. *Through Ordinary Eyes: The Civil War Correspondence of Rufus Robbins, Private, 7th Regiment, Massachusetts Volunteers*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2005. xi + 220 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8032-9006-8.

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## A Private's Civil War

The growing number of published letters and diaries by Civil War soldiers over the last ten years reflects increased attention on the part of historians and suggests that their experiences are now central to understanding key questions of the war. Civil War soldiers are no longer vague actors who followed the commands of superiors and marched blindly into battle, but complex actors worthy of serious analysis. Historians have offered accounts of Civil War soldiers' ideological convictions, the role of unit cohesion, and the influence of loved ones back home as factors to understanding what motivated so many to remain in the ranks even after years of bloody fighting. The daily minutiae of camp life has been uncovered, and the hard realities of marching and battle have also been described in detail and broken down into coherent chapters as if the soldiers themselves experienced the war in this way.[1]

*Through Ordinary Eyes* brings together the correspondence of Rufus Robbins along with his brothers, sisters, and parents. Compared with the experiences found in other published accounts, readers will find few descriptions of the battlefield and its horrors or references to key figures of the war. This, however, is not a shortcoming, but serves to remind the reader that the lives of these men were not confined to the battlefield, but included a broad spectrum of experiences that were deemed to be worthy of communicating to loved ones back home. The Robbins family hailed from South Abington, Massachusetts and subscribed to the Universalist faith. Robbins, a cobbler

and farmer, enlisted at the age of thirty-one; his letters home cover the period between June 1861 and February 1863.

Robbins's letters offer vivid descriptions of camp life, including picket duty, entrenchments, target practice, and fatigue duty. Readers interested in the types of food consumed by Civil War soldiers will find a great deal to chew on in Robbins's account. Rufus enticed his brother Henry by predicting, "if you could see my nice fried pork and white mealy potatoes mashed up on my plate with a little gravy on them and the sauce sweetened a very little, you would say it was good enough for anyone" (p. 168). The correspondence presents a contrast between references to peaceful scenes of muskmelons, apple orchards, and singing birds on the one hand and brief references to the horrors of the battlefield.

The reader soon realizes that Robbins was a simple man caught up in an event that defined his generation. On occasion one wonders whether Robbins was aware of the important cause for which he volunteered, because he spent an inordinate amount of time reporting on things that may seem to us as mundane. Robbins did on occasion reflect on the meaning of the war and whether his time in the army constituted a worthy cause. In response to his sister and father who approved of his service, Robbins noted that "I am engaged in a good cause" (p. 70). Individual letters also point to the constant struggle between a belief in the cause and the longing for home and

loved ones: "I think of home often, but not with regret that I left it, for there is need of me here" (p. 132).

Robbins's life was cut short in early 1863 after contracting chronic diarrhea and suffering through numerous transfers from hospital to hospital owing to a doctor's refusal to issue a discharge. Perhaps sensing that his time was short, Robbins shared some final thoughts with his family: "Last night ... I dreamt I was at home and I was out under the trees and they looked so beautiful. When I got awake it was toward morning, and I longed so to be there to walk under the trees and look up into the beautiful moon and one bright star was shining for me.... Tell [mother], *I have no doubts* about the future. It is all bright for me, and no fear of dying, for I

feel that God will make it easy for me" (p. 191). Robbins's words—like so many other Civil War soldiers—have a way of reducing the roughly 140 years to a single point, thus bringing home the ordinariness of emotion that is universally understood. *Through Ordinary Eyes* is a worthy addition to the growing list of published primary sources from the Civil War.

Note

[1]. For an overview of this literature, see Reid Mitchell, "Not the General but the Soldier," in *Writing the Civil War: The Quest to Understand*, ed. James M. McPherson and William J. Cooper Jr. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), pp. 81-95.

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