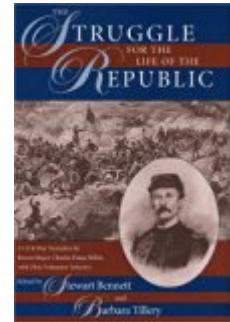


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Charles Dana Miller. *The Struggle for the Life of the Republic: A Civil War Narrative by Brevet Major Charles Dana Miller*. Kent and London: Kent State University Press, 2004. xxiii + 301 pp. \$34.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87338-785-9.

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Published on H-CivWar (September, 2006)



The outbreak of the Civil War found Charles Dana Miller, a grain merchant at Newark, Ohio, just up the road from his native Mt. Vernon. A Republican and a patriot, he enlisted in October 1861, as a sergeant in what became Company C of the 76th Ohio Volunteer Infantry. He was appointed sergeant, rose to first lieutenant and became captain of that company in 1864, leaving on November 18, while back home on leave.

Miller took with him the mostly empty ledger from his grain business and kept a diary of his service throughout the war in the western theater. His regiment went into action at Fort Donelson, and continued through Shiloh and the occupation of Corinth. It subsequently participated in the campaigns for Vicksburg and Atlanta. He records not only these experiences but offers some wonderful insights into camp life, relations with civilians, and his own ambivalence about the “contraband.”

As editors Stewart Bennett and Barbara Tillery note, Miller’s narrative contains a particularly good account of the often-neglected battle of Arkansas Post (pp. 75-81). With the December 1862 fiasco at Chickasaw Bluffs still reverberating among Federal troops along the Mississippi, Union General John A. McClernand and Rear Admiral David D. Porter Managed a combined operation of about 33,000 men on transports escorted by ironclads and gunboats in a combined operation against the Confederate garrison under Gen. Thomas J. Churchill on January 9-11, 1863. The Federals isolated and prepared to storm the overwhelmingly outnumbered but well-positioned earthworks. Miller was in the thick of this, and wound up lying in the grass for three hours within one hundred yards of those works. In the end, they captured about five thousand Confederates, thou-

sands of arms, and tens of thousands of rounds of ammunition.

Historians have benefited greatly from the wave of interest in the Civil War that sent many people back into their attics, unearthing previously neglected relics of the conflict. In her preface, Tillery, the great-granddaughter of Maj. Charles Dana Miller, recalls with regret her lack of interest when the major’s son (her great-uncle) circulated a typed version of his narrative within the family shortly before the Civil War centennial celebration (pp. ix-x). She became interested in the mid-1990s, scoured for information within the family, and enlisted the help of historian Stewart Bennett in preparing the manuscript for publication.

With variations, the story is sufficiently familiar to raise questions regarding the merits to anyone beyond the family of yet another narrative of the Civil War by a participant. Certainly, the descendants of their comrades seeking information on the regiment have ready access to more rounded information through some of the websites established by Civil War round tables and buffets. (The “Ohio in the Civil War” site includes a Full bibliography on Miller’s 76th Ohio at <http://www.ohiocivilwar.com/cw76.html>.)

Much of the attraction for an account like Miller’s is the way a soldier’s experience often tears through the generally stoic narrative seemingly required by the nineteenth-century soldierly ethos. In the course of recounting troop movements and battles, Miller records his experience with friends and relatives in both armies. These glimpses of the passion that brought them into volunteer service illuminate our understanding in a way that logistics cannot. However worthwhile such accounts

may be, however, meaning can remain elusive or idiosyncratic.

Charles Dana Miller and his neighbors had their own history with which to contend. He and his recruits camped for months in the thirty acres enclosed by the “Old Fort,” used as the Licking County Fairgrounds. This site, the Great Circle Earthworks, features a roughly twenty-foot earthen circle and ditch with a diameter of 1200 feet, and forms part of the most impressively monumental prehistoric Indian earthworks in North America. Certainly, the presence of such structures took a well-organized people, providing an optimistic nineteenth century with a warning that societies can disintegrate as well as progress. In 1858, William Pidgeon’s popular *Traditions of De-Coo-Dah* explained that disintegration in terms of a horrific war among America’s original inhabitants that exterminated the participants, citing the presence of such seemingly martial structures as the “Old Fort.” The irony was probably not lost on all of those who shivered through winter of 1861-62, in what they thought were the ruins of a civilization that destroyed itself by war.

For a generation, people had walked those massive embankments bordered by a deep ditch, and surveyed their complex geometries, without digging for a deeper understanding. The consciences of white Amer-

icans, whose relentless advance across North America was nothing if not conquest, actually found solace in “the fact” that the small groups of native peoples in the region could not have built them, which made the Indian claim to the land one of conquest. The physical remains of the Indian works provided a kind of Rorschach test for the mythmaking of a terribly race-conscious society under such stresses that it was about to war with itself.

That first-person narratives of the Civil War experience remain so popular raises questions as to whether they provide us with something similar. Scholarly attempts to unearth and document what was behind it have none of the wide appeal of “walking the works” and “surveying” the mounds of documents, noting that a literate and articulate people left them behind. Accounts like Major Miller’s should inspire readers to dig a bit in search of a deeper meaning—into slavery and other questions—but they definitely do not require it.

This may, of course, be the key to their popularity. The assumptions and predispositions the readers take to the work need be challenged only to the extent that the reader wishes. Such narratives will suit readers prepared to draw from them only such lessons as they are willing to accept. Still, those seeking a more rigorous challenge may also find Miller’s work provocative.

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Citation: Mark Lause. Review of Miller, Charles Dana, *The Struggle for the Life of the Republic: A Civil War Narrative by Brevet Major Charles Dana Miller*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. September, 2006.

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