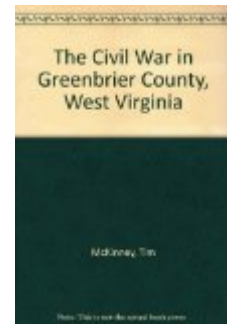


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Tim McKinney. *The Civil War in Greenbrier County West Virginia*. Charleston: Quarrier Press, 2004. xvi + 415 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-891852-36-7.

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Life and Death on the Margins of a Larger War

The American Civil War raged for four years, as massive armies led by great generals moved across the Eastern and Western theaters of war, engaging in great battles. The outcome of these battles often seemed to have great weight, both political and military, and, just as often, the armies and the battles left thousands of casualties and physical destruction in their wake. At least, that is how most of us see the war in our minds and that is the focus of most Civil War historiography, perhaps rightfully so. However, any war has margins, places where the great armies do not go, where no great battles are fought, and where no great outcomes are determined. Yet, these places still see fighting, and the lives of those that live there are forever altered. Here, the casualties and the damage may be smaller in scale, but that makes them more individual, more personal, and the pain of loss somehow greater because it is not lost in the enormity of the event itself.

In Tim McKinney's book, *The Civil War in Greenbrier County West Virginia*, the reader sees and feels what life and death are like on the edges, the margins, of a great war. It is an examination of the war in a microcosm. As such, it peels away the effects of greatness, of size and magnitude, and lets us see the horror, pain, and very personal suffering of a civil conflict in a small place, a place of no strategic consequence, once quiet and serene but now torn by violence and death. For any reader who has studied the war from only the larger view, it is an interesting journey to take.

Unfortunately, for the most part, the reader of this

book must get there on his/her own. That is because the author chose not to write the book from the viewpoint described above. Rather, he seems to have written this book for a purely regional audience. Its tone, organization, and lack of maps demonstrate no intent to educate any reader who has lived their life outside the region within a few hundred miles of Greenbrier County, West Virginia. Thus, what could have been a truly remarkable book becomes very ordinary. The reader is left to find his/her way alone and seek out the remarkable without McKinney's help, which is unfortunate because the book contains some wonderful historical gems. McKinney was able to tap into marvelous sources of personal memoirs and letters, perform detailed research on a few local legends, and uncover a wealth of information that shows how the Civil War affected the lives of the inhabitants of a rural county lying between the two great theaters of the war.

One of the most notable impacts the reader can sense in McKinney's story is the underlying and often overwhelming sense of fear the people of Greenbrier County lived with every day for much of the war. As a secessionist county caught up in the process of creating a new Unionist state, Greenbrier residents feared what might become of them under Union occupation. From McKinney's research, one sees how deeply people believed their Yankee enemies to be monsters who would wreak havoc on both persons and property. Therefore, from the outset of the war, they begged for assistance and protection from both the Commonwealth of Virginia and Confederate governments, but never received what they felt they

needed. Admittedly, the people and the leaders of the county suffered from a natural tendency, born of a desire to protect their homes, to see their county as strategically vital to both the Commonwealth and the Confederacy. Unfortunately, after an initial period of interest from Richmond, which even saw the assignment of the venerable Robert E. Lee to the county, Greenbrier County, as well as the entire northwest region of Virginia that became West Virginia, became a backwater to the governments of both sides. As a result, the people would see themselves beset by Union raiding and, eventually, the occupation they feared so much.

Unfortunately, another point which comes home clearly is that, to some extent, the fears about Federal occupation were not entirely unjustified. For much of the war, Greenbrier County and large portions of West Virginia were home to guerillas and bushwhackers. Some of these men were individuals truly trying to fight for the Confederate cause, but, as McKinney's research shows, many, if not most, were nothing but a criminal element who found the margins of the war to their liking. Some of these partisan units were formally recognized by the Confederate military, but even most of those were eventually shut down because of their lawless behavior. Meanwhile, the Federal reaction to these elements was harsh and uncompromising. McKinney ably documents the results. As Union forces occupied Greenbrier County, the inhabitants found themselves subject to military law and trial by courts martial. The results could be tragic and unjust, as McKinney demonstrates in one of the most fascinating parts of his book.

McKinney tells the tale of a farmer named David Creigh, whose story is apparently something of a local legend. Creigh's tale was painstakingly researched by McKinney, who discovered the long ignored records of his court martial in the National Archives. What emerges from this research is a tragic example of how deeply the war could impact one ordinary man and his family. Creigh discovered a Union cavalryman ransacking his house, trying to steal anything of value. The farmer tried to stop him and the confrontation led to a struggle between Creigh and the trooper, during which Creigh's wife accidentally discharged a pistol, killing the soldier. In his panic and fear of reprisal against his family, Creigh hid the cavalryman's body in a well, where, weeks later it was inadvertently discovered by a Union patrol. Creigh was arrested, tried, and sentenced to hang, even though it seems most of the officers in his trial liked him and even

sympathized with his plight. There was no justice, only the satisfaction of a need by Union authorities to ensure that the occupied feared their occupiers.

Another facet of McKinney's book that is of historical interest is his descriptions of the effect of disease among Confederate forces serving in Greenbrier County. Of course, as we well know, disease killed more Civil War soldiers than did the rigors of combat. However, in McKinney's writing, we see it more clearly, descriptively, and personally. His pages seemed filled with stories of the sick and it would appear from McKinney's research that virtually every major public and private structure in the county became a hospital at some point. At times, it must have felt like the entire county was a sick ward. One of the best passages of the book in this regard is the chapter McKinney dedicates to the story of the grand old resort at White Sulphur Springs. This still famous resort spent most of the war being used as a military medical facility. McKinney provides wonderful details on its wartime story, especially the experiences of a group of dedicated Catholic nuns from South Carolina who nursed the sick at White Sulphur Springs during much of 1862.

Finally, throughout McKinney's book, there is a strong human element to the story. He makes heavy use of memoirs, diaries, and letters that give the reader a sense of what both soldiers and civilians experienced during the war. Their personal hopes, fears, opinions, and prejudices give the modern reader a sense of the society that inhabited this rural county on the edges of the war. Many of the stories are humorous, some are touching and sentimental, and more than a few are tragic. A civilian's fear of invasion and occupation come across clearly, as does a soldier's longing for home and family. These kinds of human insights are always of value to the historian because they keep one in touch with how these people viewed the great disaster going on around them, and how they struggled to survive it. It also able demonstrates that, in the end, they were not so different from us.

Overall, McKinney's book must be described as a disappointment. Had his scope and purpose been focused beyond a book intended for a purely regional audience, he might have produced something truly special. In addition, his book suffers from poor editing that makes reading it, occasionally, a painful exercise. Still, for those readers willing to work past these barriers, there is much to be found of value. It is just unfortunate the author makes us work so hard to find it.

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