H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Daniel J. Hoisington, ed.** *Gettysburg and the Christian Commission.* Roseville: Edinborough Press, 2002. 136 pp. $13.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-889020-05-1.

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**Published on** H-CivWar (November, 2006)

**Always Abounding in the Work of the Lord**

Referring to the "seething hell" of the American Civil War, Walt Whitman famously opined, "the real war will never get in the books."[1] Perhaps no one understood better what Whitman meant than the individuals who worked on behalf of the United States Christian Commission (USCC) during America's deadliest conflict.

The USCC was formed in November 1861 by representatives from Northern YMCA chapters who sought to provide a vehicle through which the spiritual and temporal needs of Union soldiers could be met. Although the USCC employed paid agents to coordinate much of its work, most of the group's services were performed by unpaid volunteers, or "delegates." According to the USCC's records, from 1862 (when the group began its efforts in the field) through 1865 (it ceased official operations in February 1866), the Commission's 4,859 delegates preached 58,308 sermons, held 77,744 prayer meetings, and wrote 92,321 letters for sick and wounded soldiers. Although the accuracy of these numbers might be in doubt, the massive scope of the USCC's program is not. Indeed, in addition to the aforementioned activities, the USCC distributed massive quantities of Bibles, tracts, hymnals, periodicals, and library books to troops who were eager to obtain reading materials. Further, Commission delegates buried the dead, comforted the wounded (whether on the battlefield or in army hospitals), and prepared special meals for enfeebled soldiers who were unable to survive on poor army rations. All of this work was designed primarily to save the souls of the "boys in blue," an especially urgent task given the risks inherent in military life. The Commission's herculean effort was made possible by donations of cash, publications, food, services, and miscellaneous items valued at over six million dollars.

Daniel J. Hoisington's work seeks to chronicle the exploits of USCC delegates in the immediate aftermath of the Battle of Gettysburg. The first part of the book, an introductory essay on the Commission, includes a brief sketch of the group's origins and its overall program. The author then focuses his attention on the Battle of Gettysburg and how the USCC (and, more specifically, its delegates) responded to the carnage that the battle wrought. Finally, Hoisington comments on the legacy of the Commission's efforts in the wake of Gettysburg, explaining that the battle spurred the organization to even greater acts of benevolence in the coming months and years.

The second part of the book, which constitutes the majority of it, is comprised largely of republished contemporary accounts of USCC associates who labored at Gettysburg, as well as the heretofore largely unpublished diary of a prominent Commission delegate who arrived on the scene as the battle was still unfolding. Two of the previously published accounts first appeared in a September 1863 document entitled, *Second Report of the Committee of Maryland*, a narrative of the activities of the USCC's Maryland branch.

The first of these accounts, "The Battle of Gettysburg and the Christian Commission," was written by Andrew B. Cross, one of the first Commission delegates to arrive at Gettysburg. As Hoisington points out, Cross composed what is probably the most complete overview of the Christian Commission's labors in the aftermath of the war's most celebrated battle. Cross's description of his work among the wounded, which in large part consisted of assistance to Confederates, provides a searing portrait of the many vital services that USCC laborers provided to the gray as well as to the blue (which, Cross argued, was consistent with the principles of Christian charity). Cross wrote of Christian Commission volunteers dressing wounds, performing religious services, writing letters on behalf of the wounded, distributing Bibles, tracts, and books, and furnishing vital supplies (including wine, biscuits, crackers, bandages, and shirts) to the hospitalized men. Providing an assessment of the Commission's work that is eerily reminiscent of Whitman's assertion, Cross explained, "*No pen shall write out those histories*–

no heart can enter into and be made fully to partake of those varied and unmingled sorrows, which identify so many thousand hearts, with the hills and fields, the rocky places, the swamps the houses and barns around the lines of that terrible battle" (p. 41).

The second account taken from the Maryland Committee's report, "An Incident at Gettysburg," is the work of Jane Boswell Moore, a young woman who, while never a delegate of the USCC, nonetheless labored on the group's behalf at Gettysburg. Hoisington also appended to this selection two letters written by Moore that were first published in Baltimore's *Lutheran Observer* during the war. Not surprisingly, Moore's descriptions of the battle's aftermath mirror those of Cross, and she likewise concluded, "No human pen can adequately depict the horrors of a battlefield" (p. 113). Also like Cross and his associates, Moore ministered to the needs of Confederates as well as Union troops. While Cross and the Commission in general justified such actions largely on scriptural grounds, Moore provided a more mundane explanation: "many say that our kindness has done more to subjugate them than all the shells and balls that have been fired during the war,–they never expected such treatment, and have not the heart to raise a hand against us" (p. 115).

The final republished selection that Hoisington includes in his book, entitled "Two Brass Buttons: A Story of the Christian Commission," first appeared in the pages of the *Philadelphia Weekly Press* in March 1887. It is a sentimental account of the Gettysburg endeavors of a USCC delegate who, as a result of a string of improbable events, ended up helping an old Southern gentleman find the remains of his son at Gettysburg eight years after the battle.

Perhaps the most significant portion of Hoisington's book is its inclusion of the diary of John C. Chamberlain, a Christian Commission delegate who is better remembered as the brother of the famed Joshua L. Chamberlain, hero of Little Round Top. Although the diary is something of a curiosity due to its author's connection to such a high-profile war hero, Chamberlain's journal is significant in its own right. Its pages, which Hoisington has enriched with an abundance of annotations to provide the reader with helpful context, reveal much about the Commission's early work at Gettysburg, including the difficult working conditions and poor accommodations that delegates frequently faced. Indeed, at one point Chamberlain and a companion were relegated to sleeping on coffins while traveling on a canal boat (p. 86). Like the accounts of Andrew B. Cross and Jane Boswell Moore, Chamberlain's diary provides a detailed description of a delegate's service among the wounded at Gettysburg. Chamberlain recounted his preaching, and he enumerated the many items that he distributed among the men: Bibles, oranges, lemons, jelly, shirts, and "silent comforters," which were calendars that contained religious messages. After relating a series of disturbing sights, sounds, and odors (including charred bodies and soldiers who had sustained grisly injuries), Chamberlain declared that he would never forget the carnage that resulted from the battle (p. 95).

*Gettysburg and the Christian Commission* is a welcome addition to the sparse literature on a significant benevolent organization of the Civil War. The book's introduction provides a useful overview of the genesis and subsequent development of the USCC's program, with an emphasis on the group's efforts to alleviate the suffering that resulted from the clash at Gettysburg. Hoisington has drawn upon a rich variety of primary sources to tell his story, and the result is largely satisfying. The author's introduction, however, is not without its problems. Although the reader is exposed to several references to the Christian Commission in the first few pages of the book, Hoisington neglects to provide a description of the organization until page 5. Until that point, the uninitiated reader is left guessing about the nature of the mysterious group.

More significantly, though, the author's introduction tends to be long on quotations and short on analysis, and the analysis he provides is occasionally misleading or incomplete. For example, Hoisington suggests that the Christian Commission remained largely "dormant" until it vaulted to prominence after the Battle of Gettysburg (pp. 6, 11). While it is clear that the group's actions in the aftermath of that battle gained it national exposure, the USCC had not remained idle until then. Indeed, proof of this can be found even in the *Second Report of the Committee of Maryland*, from which Hoisington obtained two of the accounts he reprinted in his book. The report discusses the vital labors of the Commission in the aftermath of the Battle of Antietam (September 17, 1862), for instance, where the Commission's workers were reportedly responsible for saving the lives of hundreds of soldiers.

In addition, the author makes much of the rivalry and even hostility between the Christian Commission and the United States Sanitary Commission (USSC), which was formed in the summer of 1861 as a complement to the army's medical bureau. The author is right to suggest that the leaders of the USCC and USSC viewed each other

with distrust, and the two groups did indeed compete for public donations. However, despite these points of contention, which often led to conflicts in the eastern theater of operations, the USCC and USSC often worked together harmoniously in the West. Indeed, the Reverend Edward P. Smith, who ultimately became field secretary of the Christian Commission, frequently commented on the large degree of assistance that USSC agents extended to him while he labored on behalf of the USCC in the western theater of operations. Hoisington's discussion makes no mention of this significant level of cooperation.

Further, the author's explanation of the USCC's assistance to wounded Confederates, as well as the link between the Commission's temporal and spiritual ministries, is incomplete. While Hoisington characterizes USCC aid to Confederates as a practical and disarming measure that "tempered the rebels' hard-hearted views" (p. 30), delegates like Andrew B. Cross quoted Scripture to justify their actions. Cross reflected the general views of the Christian Commission when he insisted that, above all, Christian charity demanded that delegates aid fallen Confederates: "Generally, without reserve, they [delegates] adopted the principle of the Gospel, which says: '*If thine enemy hunger, feed him*,' &c.–Rom. xxi:19-21; Prov. xxv:21" (p. 54).

As for the significance of the Commission's temporal and spiritual ministries, Hoisington correctly notes that saving men's souls was "the Commission's central work" (p. 24). However, the author fails to explain the vital relationship between the two types of ministry. While the USCC believed that Christian charity compelled them to provide for men's temporal needs, those efforts were always viewed as a means by which men's souls might be snatched from the jaws of hell. Countless Commission delegates observed that providing for a man's physical needs made him much more receptive to the organization's spiritual message: to attain salvation, one must accept Jesus Christ as one's Savior. As Commission chairman George H. Stuart put it, "there is a good deal of religion in a warm shirt and a good beefsteak." [2]

Hoisington's decision to include the contemporary accounts that comprise the majority of his book was, on balance, a good one. The publication of John C. Chamberlain's diary is a boon to professional historians and buffs alike, as it sheds new light on the vitality of the Commission's efforts at Gettysburg, especially in their early stages. The republication of the Andrew B. Cross and Jane Boswell Moore selections makes a significant amount of interesting and informative material available to a new generation of readers, all of it adding to our understanding of the USCC's mission and activities in the wake of the war's bloodiest battle. Unfortunately, though, a number of typographical errors mar Hoisington's effort. More careful copy editing would have averted this problem. In addition, the book's final story, "Two Brass Buttons," is by Hoisington's own admission apocryphal and therefore out of place among the book's other selections. While the story reflects accurately some of the conditions among Gettysburg's wounded and certainly tugs at the reader's heart strings, the dubious nature of much of the account suits it better for inclusion in a volume of historical fiction.

None of the book's shortcomings detract from the fact that Hoisington has enriched our understanding of the United States Christian Commission, one of the least-known and least-understood participants in the American Civil War. Those of us who are working to correct these deficiencies welcome the author's contributions to the cause and appreciate his labors in the vineyard.

Notes

[1]. Walter Lowenfels, ed., *Walt Whitman's Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 1961), p. 293.

[2]. Robert Ellis Thompson, ed., *The Life of George H. Stuart* (Philadelphia: J.M. Stoddart & Co., 1890), p. 129.

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**Citation**: David Raney. Review of Hoisington, Daniel J., ed., *Gettysburg and the Christian Commission.* H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. November, 2006.
**URL**: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12492

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