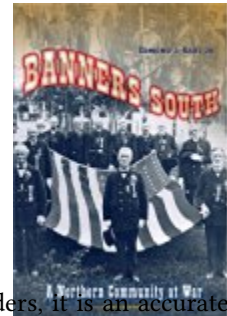


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Edmund J. Raus, Jr. *Banners South: A Northern Community at War*. Kent: Kent State University Press, 2005. xiv + 258 pp. \$39.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87338-842-9.

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Banners South: A Northern Community at War by Edmund J. Raus Jr. is a careful study of a community coming to grips with the Civil War. The author personalizes the history of the war through the eyes of the people from a rural community. Raus uses letters home, journals, personal memoirs, and newspaper articles to reconstruct the lives of the men of the 23rd New York Regiment from Cortland and the surrounding area of the southern tier of New York counties. Raus's roots in the Cortland area help him to construct a picture of the land, town, and people who lived there in the middle of the nineteenth century. The view that the reader sees is real people responding to the war in all the varieties of the human spirit.

The author sets the foundation for his story with a description of the land in the Cortland area. This reviewer found Raus's description particularly effective in that I spent my undergraduate years at Cortland State. Raus's scene-setting works for everyone though. He states in his preface, "that the war experience of the central New York farm communities represented by the 23rd was not unlike that of many other rural counties that made up much of the Civil War-era North" (p. xi). He further personalizes the regimental history by relating how his grandmother had passed down stories of one of his relatives, a member of the regiment, something that many Americans, given their forbearers' history, can relate to.

The author's explanation for the motivation to fight for northern soldiers is stated in this passage: "In general, he did not fight with a passion for conquest or personal gain or with a deep-seated hatred toward his enemy. He saw himself less as a warrior than as a carpenter, using the tools of war to repair the crumbling political house of the nation" (p. 59). While this statement may take the

glory out of the war for some readers, it is an accurate description of the feelings of many men who joined the colors. There was romance and glory in volunteering, but as the initial euphoria quickly wore off in the day to day boredom of camp life and the terror of battles, the men of the 23rd, and other regiments, knew that they had a "job" to do.

Raus's descriptions of the battles are eminently readable and create vivid pictures of the realities of warfare in that time period. His experience working for the National Park Service has served him well in creating for the reader a sense of "being there." Even though the author's descriptions add very little new information about the tactics and strategy of the war, he does add new perspectives to soldiers' lives and their feelings as related to friends and family members. These perspectives are more like adding to the patina of a renovated piece of fine wood, rather than a complete reconstruction. There are new facts and details that help to further form the overall view towards the war.

An example of the type of personal detail offered by Raus is contained in a letter from a young man from a small town near Cortland. William Saxton debated with himself whether to join up: "I don't think a young man ever went over all the considerations more carefully than I did.... I realized that it meant an entire change in my plans for life. It might mean sickness, wounds, loss of limb, and even life itself. It certainly would mean hardships, privations and suffering. But my country was in danger. Did not my country need me more than I needed what I had planned for myself? In fact if my country was not saved, what would my plans amount to anyway? Others had gone, more must go. Was it not my duty now to go also? In the afternoon the matter was

settled. I had arrived at a conviction and a conclusion. My country needed me. It was my duty to respond. I would go. When I came to supper that night I told my father my decision and, with tears in his eyes, he said, 'God Bless you, William, if you have decided it is your duty to go I shall not say no' " (p. 226).

This scene was played out thousands of times in the minds of many men, northern and southern. The key lies in the author's ability to find this passage and place it in the best place to affect the mood of the reader when dealing with recruitment efforts in late 1862, after the blood-bath of Antietam.

The war was soon over for the 23rd and the regiment, but not all of its members mustered out of service. The men saw failure and success after the war. Some could not handle the translation of life back to peace. Many re-entered life with an experience that helped them mature.

In the words of Hosea Rockwell in 1885: "As a rule, we are better citizens for having been soldiers. We learned what citizenship in an undivided union is worth by realizing what it cost. We have out-grown the illusions of youth and have learned that the battle of life is a hard one, with trials, dangers and adversities to meet just as we met them in 1862 in Virginia and Maryland" (quoted, p.254).

Banners South is not an epic, but it is a landmark, not in the sense of an imposing feature that anyone would notice, but as a reminder that others have sacrificed for their country. To forget that sacrifice, whether in loss of life, or commitment of time and service, does those men a disservice, or in the words of the author in an understated way: "Cortland County has left future generations of its sons and daughters something to think about" (p. 257).

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