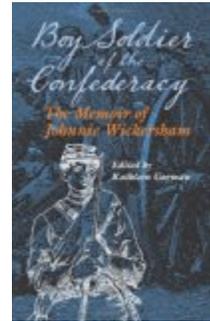


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kathleen Gorman, ed. *Boy Soldier of the Confederacy: The Memoir of Johnnie Wickersham*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006. vii + 169 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8093-2722-5.

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We Fought Like Wild Animals with Bulldog Tenacity

Kathleen Gorman has edited the autobiographical account of Johnnie Wickersham, a youthful fifteen-year old Confederate enlistee. Gorman, an associate professor of history at Minnesota State University, Mankato, presents an absorbing narrative. Her aim is to weave fact with fiction related to the South's "Lost Cause" myth: "fact ... tells us of the Civil War experience for the average young Confederate," while the "fiction [speaks] of the need for veterans on a losing side to maintain the honor of their cause" (p. ix). Wickersham wrote his memoir in 1915, fifty years after the succession of hostilities and only one year into the "Great War" that engulfed forty-three nations. It was published in 1918 with the stated purpose of recounting his service to the Missouri State Guard and the greater Confederacy for his grandson Curtis. Why, though, did he wait until 1915?

Gary Gallagher and Alan Nolan, in *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History*, write that "the Lost Cause is ... an American legend. [T]he legends tells us that the war was a mawkish and essentially heroic and romantic melodrama, an honorable sectional duel, a time of martial glory on both sides, and triumphant nationalism." They cite recent works on the "Lost Cause Myth" and suggest that "the purpose of the legend was to foster a heroic image of secession and the war so that the Confederates would have salvaged at least their honor from the all-encompassing defeat." [1] Gallagher's and Nolan's characterization of the Civil War as a "melodrama" and "duel," a time of "glory" and "nationalism," might equally apply to the Great War. Wickersham's memoir reflects

motives of justification and honor. The question of why he was moved to write fifty years after his service may be partially answered by the fact that the Great War represented one of the greatest military conflicts since the American Civil War; in a reflective mood at age 69, Wickersham apparently felt that he should provide for family members an account of his activities related to America's last great conflict. As Gorman writes, though the memoir is not always accurate regarding the historical events, the work enabled "veterans on a losing side to maintain the honor of their cause" (p. ix).

Wickersham was born in Kentucky in 1846. The Wickersham family migrated from Kentucky to Lebanon, Missouri with two slaves in 1857. The year 1857 was noted for the famous U.S. Supreme Court case *Dred Scott v. Sandford* and the heightened bloodshed known as "Bleeding Kansas." Lebanon is located in the Ozarks of south central Missouri, between Springfield and Jefferson City, and its residents fought for both the Union and the Confederacy. The town was occupied on numerous occasions by both sides, but more often with Federal troops protecting the "Wire Road" (telegraph line) between St. Louis and Springfield. The famous "Wire Road" occupied an important geographical and topographical boundary during the Battle of Wilson Creek in 1861. Questions of historical accuracy and the reliability of first-hand accounts need to be addressed immediately for readers who are not historians. Wickersham describes events during the war that touched his daily life as a young boy on his way to becoming a young man, including horse-

rating, receiving his uniform, his first scouting assignment, his first kiss, being alone on a battlefield, hearing “Dixie” for the first time, imprisonment, and capturing prisoners. He also describes his participation in some of the Civil War’s major engagements: Wilson Creek [Oak Hill] (August 1861), Pea Ridge [Elkhorn Tavern] (March 1862), Shiloh [Pittsburg Landing] (April 1862), Vicksburg (May-July 1863), Kennesaw Mountain (June 1864), Atlanta (July 1864), and the Savannah Campaign (November-December 1864). Wickersham does not mention receiving notification, in the summer of 1863, of Union General Thomas Ewing’s infamous “General Order No. 11” which expelled residents of the rural western Missouri counties of Bates, Cass, Jackson, and Vernon. The order evacuated all residents, no matter Union or Confederate, from these counties. Shortly following the evacuations, Union troops burned, in a scorched-earth policy, all buildings, crops, and personal property remaining in those counties.

Gorman notes up front that Wickersham’s descriptions of events may be suspect with respect to accuracy. As editor, she was not responsible for correcting textual inaccuracies and she should be commended for maintaining the memoir’s original text. She has corrected, though, language that may be unfamiliar to the modern reader. The inclusion of more maps (e.g., the battles of Wilson Creek or Pea Ridge) and photographs of major participants (e.g., Confederate general Sterling Price or Union general Nathaniel Lyon) would have assisted the Civil War historian and general reader in placing locations and names alongside the Wickersham text.

Gorman divides the memoir into six well-organized chapters and supplies historical context “to provide a more structured narrative flow” (p. xiii). Her introduction provides excellent background on Wickersham’s

family and times in Missouri and includes a map indicating some cities and major battles in proximity to Lebanon. Her notes are extremely descriptive and contain additional information for the reader. Gorman writes that “the memoir is a picaresque tale, an old man remembering the boy he once was; the boy forever lost to four years of bloody warfare and fifty years of seeing those four years transformed into something magical and mystical” (p. xix). The memoir should be considered by both historians and general readers as an example of the common soldier’s experience.

Historian William C. Davis has written that “virtually all wars have their winners and losers. To the vanquished the manner of being beaten may post more peril than defeat itself, for the character of every peace is shaped by the close of hostilities that gave it birth. Never is this more the case than in a civil war.”[2] Wickersham describes the final surrender thus: “Our eyes involuntarily turned in the direction of that beloved battle flag which had never known dishonor or disgrace, and we thought of the many, many heroes who had died under it, and with one accord we struggled to obtain a scrap of it. The war was over, and we had lost” (pp. 131-132). Wickersham’s scrap of flag represented the immediate conclusion of military hostilities; his memoir represents the personal conclusion of his “Lost Cause” memories.

Notes

[1]. Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan, eds., *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 12, 13-14.

[2]. William C. Davis, *An Honorable Defeat: The Last Days of the Confederate Government* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 2001), xiii.

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