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**Robert E. Bonner**. *The Soldier's Pen: Firsthand Impressions of the Civil War.* New York: Hill & Wang, 2006. xxi + 248 pp. $26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-8744-0.

**Aaron Sheehan-Dean, ed**. *The View from the Ground: Experiences of Civil War Soldiers.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007. 266 pp. $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2413-1.

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## Revisiting Civil War Soldiers: More Answers to the Same Questions

The two volumes under review continue the exploration of Civil War soldiers begun two generations ago by Bell Wiley and revived in the 1970s and 1980s by a younger generation who grew up under the shadows of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. The questions posed then regarding race, sectionalism, patriotism, gender roles, and other social and ideological currents of the nineteenth century have generated a wealth of detailed studies on these critical aspects of the Civil War era. Although there has been an appropriate resurgence of more traditional military history since then–there was a war going on during the years 1861 to 1865, after all–the active participation of common people has become a lasting focus of recent scholarship. Those interested in the "plain folk" have few resources as rich as the letters, diaries, regimental histories, and battle reports created amidst a war that occurred after the widespread literacy of the mid-nineteenth century and before the increasing censorship and control of soldiers' communications that occurred in the twentieth century.

Editor Aaron Sheehan-Dean opens *The View from the Ground* with a historiographical survey of the past twenty years of scholarship regarding Civil War soldiers. Correctly citing Bell Irvin Wiley as the first modern scholar to focus on common soldiers (and women) as the main objects of study, Sheehan-Dean shows how more recent scholars have explored deeper levels of analysis, treating common people as "autonomous and important actors" (p. 10) in shaping the meaning of the Civil War (and our understanding of the era) with respect to nationalism, sectionalism, slavery, race relations, combat, courage, desertion, gender roles, religion, and other aspects of political, social, intellectual, and military history. Many of these studies were based on a new reading of archival sources, principally personal letters and diaries, and on an expanded view of such traditional sources that includes accounts written by the rank-and-file soldiers and civilians, especially Southern women, who left extensive written records. As Sheehan-Davis notes, these new perspectives initially arose from the generation of scholars shaped by the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. As a new generation of scholars emerges, this volume promises to capture some of the perspectives of scholars who grew up, for the most part, after the turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s.

In the first essay, Chandra Manning examines the changing views of white Union soldiers on slavery and race. Using extensive archival and print sources, she provides new documentation of many of the issues that have engaged historians in recent decades. Although acknowledging that some Union soldiers opposed the Emancipation Proclamation, she shows that war necessities led most soldiers to accept the abolition of slavery, before their political leaders. Manning concludes by repeating the common view that the Civil War failed to fulfill the potential for racial change that it briefly opened, and that this foreshadowed the failure of Reconstruction.

While exploring Confederate perceptions of the enemy, Jason Phillips concludes that Southern soldiers' views of the enemy as barbaric shaped their resistance to surrender and to Northern control during Reconstruc-

tion. He argues that this "challenges the idea of a brothers' war and the notion that widespread fraternity marked the war years" (p. 70). Although this level of fraternity may be a misconception among some Civil War re-enactors or "buffs," it is not a view held by scholars of the past three decades. Phillips provides additional evidence of Confederates' animosity toward the Yankees, but his conclusions seem less revolutionary than he suggests. One welcome addition to our understanding that he provides is greater use of wartime songs and poetry to illustrate the opinions of Southern soldiers.

Lisa Laskin focuses on the Army of Northern Virginia to demonstrate the widening gulf that emerged during the war between soldiers' "unity and high morale" (p. 91) and the "declining home-front morale that caused a rift between soldiers and the society they were fighting to preserve" (p. 92). Much of this argument echoes Drew Gilpin Faust and others who emphasize the decline of Southern women's morale as a factor in Confederate defeat. Although acknowledging that questions of Southern morale are complicated, Larkin at times falls into the trap of overgeneralization. The view that soldiers and civilians became polarized by questions of loyalty and morale greatly oversimplifies the complex and ever-shifting realities of individual experiences. One valuable perspective that she adds, however, is an emphasis on how "men in the ANV appear to have shifted their loyalty away from the society they were fighting FOR and toward the army they were fighting IN" (p. 111). Another useful insight is her footnote regarding archival sources. Despite an apparent error in stating that "a healthy proportion" of Civil War letter writers or family members attended the colleges and universities that now house their letters, she correctly acknowledges that those letters saved and donated to archives would be expected to show a "slightly higher level of patriotism and pride in service" than one would find in the general population (p. 112n.).

One theme that has not received enough attention in recent scholarship is the role of religion in framing and influencing the lives of nineteenth-century soldiers. Despite extensive evidence of declining morals and religious backsliding during the war, religious beliefs and values shaped the context in which many soldiers encountered separation from home and family, hardships of camp life, and the fear and mass casualties created by bloody combat. The fact that two essays in this volume explore these aspects of religion may suggest one way in which historical scholarship has responded to the increasing presence of religious perspectives in contemporary political and public policy debates. Both the rise of the Christian Right in the United States, in the past three decades, and the more recent growing global influence of religious fundamentalism and its linkage to civil conflicts and tensions provide examples of the impact that religious beliefs can have on both individuals and social groups. This brings religion closer to the forefront of our thinking about the Civil War.

David W. Rolf focuses on the religious compromises and conflicts that Northern soldiers had to make in "reconciling their faith with their military duties" (p. 123). Spiritual demoralization in camps and desensitization to violence "set the stage" for spiritual compromises that soldiers needed to make for their own mental stability, Rolf argues (p. 124). Unlike Phillips, Rolf argues that fraternization among opposing pickets showed that Yankees and Rebels "rarely harbored any deep hatred for their sectional counterparts" (p. 126). However, he does show that deaths of friends and comrades led to "personal quests for vengeance" as Christian soldiers gradually overcame their religion's sanctions against taking pleasure from killing (p. 128). This led some soldiers to experience cognitive dissonance between their combat duties and a belief that they were violating God's laws.

A somewhat more traditional and limited study of Christian soldiers in the early months of the war leads Kent T. Dollar to emphasize the importance of religious convictions in helping soldiers cope with their early experiences in the army. Despite the temptations of vices such as gambling and drinking, many soldiers clung to religious traditions and beliefs. Some soldiers complained about the lack of religious services, or sought to correct sinful behavior among their comrades. Dollar's survey focuses on the expressions of religious sentiment but does not fully examine the deep tensions between faith and military obligations that Rolf depicts. By seeking to emphasize the existence of religious faithfulness prior to the outbreak of religious revivals in the fall of 1862, Dollar avoids the more complex struggles of faith and conscience that soldiers faced as the war dragged on.

Emphasizing the disunity among Northerners over political struggles and antiwar sentiment, Timothy J. Orr focuses on how Pennsylvania soldiers denounced Democrats, Copperheads, and anyone who opposed the Union's war policies as "traitorous friends of the South" (p. 171). Orr uses letters and newspapers to illustrate the vituperation of soldiers against antiwar Northerners and to show how soldiers became important allies of the Republican Party and, particularly, the Lincoln admin-

istration. When prohibited from voting, Pennsylvania soldiers passed resolutions threatening violence against treasonous civilians. Orr claims that this angry response of soldiers toward civilian dissent was "unique in American military history" (p. 189). Soldiers in most modern wars have felt betrayed by civilian antiwar sentiment, apathy, profiteering, and lack of support. This was particularly true during the Vietnam War, but also seems to be an undercurrent during the current invasion and occupation of Iraq. Orr may be overstating the uniqueness of these sentiments, although their pervasiveness during the Civil War likely did extend more widely and deeply than in most wars.

Tensions between officers and the soldiers they commanded also weakened morale and unity in both Union and Confederate armies. Focusing on the case of Colonel John Marshall of the Fourth Texas Infantry, Charles E. Brooks shows the importance of gaining soldiers' approval for successful command of volunteer troops. Brooks links this to the political principle of popular sovereignty, which led Civil War regiments to adopt elections of officers or some other means of demonstrating that officers served as agents of the people. The Southern concept of honor deepened soldiers' resistance to coercion and military subordination. Officers who violated these norms of social conduct risked losing their authority–and their positions. Brooks shows that these social relations, expressed in concepts such as popular sovereignty and election of officers, helped to provide motivation for plain folks to support a war effort led by slaveholders. In this sense, at least, the volunteer's right to select the unit in which he served and to expect that officers would respect the opinions of the common soldier made the regiment a small community and "a prototype of the republican society they went to war to defend and preserve" (p. 217).

In addition to the political, religious, social, and ideological inner tensions of Northern and Southern society identified in the preceding essays, the final essay highlights the internal conflicts prompted by state pride. Kevin M. Levin examines the competing "memories" of the Battle of the Crater during the postwar era. In order to enshrine their state's prominence in the sectional conflict, Virginia veterans formed "an organization to collect the records and preserve the history of our noble brigade" (p. 232). Veterans from North and South Carolina soon became frustrated by the Virginians' efforts to claim principal credit for victory at the Crater, a claim "sealed" by the "Virginia-centered" interpretation of the battle enshrined in creation of the Petersburg National Military Park in 1936 (p. 245). This postwar contest over ownership of the Confederate past helped Southerners "to ignore the drastic political and social changes brought about by defeat" by remembering "battlefield heroics" and celebrating "a heightened sense of honor rooted in local and state identity" (p. 245). In this Confederate nostalgia the crucial role of black troops in the Northern attack during the Battle of the Crater played little part, although Levin does briefly mention the temporary impact of the Readjuster Party's effort to establish a coalition of black and white Republicans and white Democrats between 1879 and 1883.

In a brief afterword, Joseph T. Glatthaar argues that despite Walt Whitman's oft-quoted lament that "the real war will never get in the books," since the pioneering work of Bell Wiley, in recent decades, "Historians have finally gotten the 'real war' into Civil War history" (p. 253). Despite some success in thus capturing the emotional and personal impact of the war on participants' lives, however, historians need to expand their horizons. Glatthaar urges historians to draw more fully upon techniques of other disciplines, to embrace quantitative analysis, and to conduct more postwar studies of common soldiers.

Despite laudable individual efforts to explore new sources and dig deeper into the local and specific experiences of Civil War soldiers, one is left wondering what new insights and perspectives the emerging generation of scholars offers us. What new questions should twenty-first-century historians ask about an era further and further removed from the present? How does our experience of social changes brought about by the turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s–but altered by more recent backlashes and antagonism to that era of unrest–change our understanding of the Civil War's impact? What new methodologies and interdisciplinary approaches can expand our analytical framework? What impact have postmodernism and other theoretical constructs for historical inquiry made on Civil War scholarship?

Unfortunately, although these historians provide new insights into some details, there is not much rethinking of the Civil War evident in these essays. One hopes that the more extended books and articles that these authors are preparing might expand our horizons more than this collection of essays does, but the central questions addressed in these selections remain within the framework that historians publishing in the 1980s had long ago established. These are interesting and well-crafted essays, but they do not challenge the central interpretations or

expand the methodologies of the previous generation as much as this reviewer had hoped they would.

A very different approach to examining the lives and opinions of common soldiers emerges in Robert E. Bonner's *The Soldier's Pen*. Bonner uses Civil War letters, diaries, and sketch books from sixteen individuals to address a broad range of themes, from camp life to combat, and from soldiers' morale to their response to black troops. The only unifying concept in the volume is that the sources relied upon come from a single archival repository, the Gilder Lehrman Collection currently on deposit at the New-York Historical Society. The result is a volume that fascinates in its details, but ultimately leaves scholars unsatisfied.

The fascination comes from a wealth of primary sources, from which Bonner quotes extensively. He focuses on sixteen individuals–five Southerners and eleven Northerners, two of whom were born in Europe (Germany and England). Among them, two are known only by their wartime sketches and illustrations. One of the latter is anonymous, but his humorous sketches of the experiences of a character named "George" (or "Gorge") provide insights and humor not often found in Civil War narratives. Bonner opens the volume with brief biographical sketches of these sixteen figures, including some information about their pre- and postwar experiences. This serves as a useful reference, although most of the volume's narrative identifies the writers and illustrators as it proceeds.

Judging from this selection of source materials, the 10,000 letters and diaries of Civil War soldiers in the Gilder Lehrman Collection–founded as recently as 1994–constitute a significant research source for scholarship. However, Bonner does not explain his methodology or criteria for selecting the sixteen individuals represented here. One wonders why, having narrowed potential sources to these few individuals, he did not present the materials in separate biographical profiles, highlighting the individuals' experiences, perceptions, and changing views of wartime issues.

The topical structure of the volume forces Bonner to provide contextual interweaving of a broader narrative, which attempts to tell the story of the Civil War while highlighting these few voices. These narrative bridges between transcribed letters, diary entries, and illustrations provide an interesting account of the war, which will appeal to a non-specialist readership. But Bonner does not provide source references or citations for his interpretation. Some assertions made in these narrative passages reflect contested interpretations of Civil War historiography, and few readers will fail to find statements with which they disagree (and others with which they will agree). Without cited sources, one cannot check the author's interpretation of the evidence.

This problem highlights a general concern with the volume. Although clearly and entertainingly written for a broad general audience, the book will frustrate Civil War researchers and scholars. It is neither complete enough nor sufficiently edited to provide a documentary basis for research or a substitute for visiting the archival collections, nor is it fully documented to provide an interpretation with which one might grapple, argue, or agree. It thus falls between two well-established genres of scholarship. Although it would be wonderful to report that it thereby bridges these two genres, one is forced to conclude that it does not do so successfully.

What is successful is Bonner's presentation of glimpses into the experiences and thoughts of sixteen individuals. Most impressive among these are the two illustrators. The crude cartoons of "George" 's military life provide humorous vignettes into soldier life–from drill routines to battlefield explosions that send a stick-figure George high into the air. These drawings echo many already known to Civil War researchers from a variety of soldiers, but those featuring George are numerous enough to provide a visual narrative of his military service. Bonner does a fine job of interpreting many of the drawings in the volume, showing how a historian can "read" visual sources to capture nuances of meaning. The visual sources that work best for Bonner in this regard are the more sophisticated and detailed color illustrations by Private Henry Berckhoff, a German immigrant serving in a New York regiment. A separate section of nineteen color plates by Berckhoff shows his artistic ability and eye for detail. It is also a visual treat for the reader. Throughout the topical chapters, Bonner highlights images by Berckhoff to illustrate his interpretation of soldier life.

Another successful feature of the volume is Bonner's concluding chapter, "Relics of War," which examines both the process by which soldiers composed letters, diaries, and drawings, and the means by which their families preserved these materials as "unofficial archivists" (though the term is not entirely appropriate here). In thus saving such relics of war, these family members "figured into a postbellum culture of remembering the American Civil War" (p. 225). They did so, of course, for personal and private reasons but in preserving let-

ters, diaries, and other information, they enabled future generations of researchers to gain direct access to the experiences, thoughts, and emotions of those who lived through the nation's most traumatic four years.

*The Soldier's Pen* will appeal more to the general reader than to the scholar. It tells a fascinating tale, richly illustrated with primary sources. Its usefulness for scholars and for students will be limited somewhat by its incompleteness as a collection of primary documents, by its lack of citations for interpretive passages, and by its lack of an index (an unfortunate omission). Ultimately, perhaps, the greatest benefit of the volume–and its unstated raison d'etre–is to highlight the research sources of a single archival repository. Perhaps this is enough justification for such a book, although the lost opportunities for a stronger contribution to Civil War scholarship inspire regret. Civil War researchers would welcome a fuller edition of sources, based on a clear and announced selection methodology, or an analytical interpretation based on sources from more than a single repository.

Taken together, these two volumes indicate that the investigation of Civil War soldiers continues to explore the personal, human aspects of this country's most tragic conflict. Perhaps others will take up some of the challenges articulated by Joseph Glatthaar and other experts, and break new ground using creative new methodologies, providing interpretations grounded in twenty-first century experiences, and asking new questions to explore the endlessly fascinating period of the American Civil War. For now we seem to continue following the lead of the previous generation. For those of us who pioneered some of these lines of investigation twenty or thirty years ago, this at first blush seems flattering. On further thought, however, one wishes for fresh questions, new lines of inquiry, and expanded horizons among Civil War historians.

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