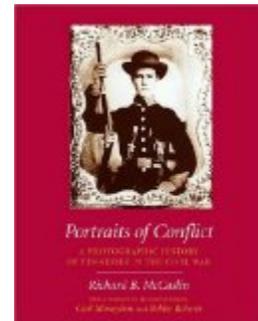


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard B. McCaslin. *Portraits of Conflict: A Photographic History of Tennessee in the Civil War*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2007. xiii + 398 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55728-831-8.

Reviewed by Bob Zeller (Center for Civil War Photography)
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Portraits of a State at War

Since the centennial of the American Civil War, one of the most fruitful areas of new scholarship has been the study and interpretation of the almost unlimited reservoir of photographs related to the conflict.

In the mid-1970s, photohistorian William A. Frassanito pioneered the use of documentary photographs as objects of intense historical study, producing groundbreaking works with his volumes on Gettysburg and Antietam photographs. In the 1980s, the National Historical Society's six-volume *Image of War* series (1981-84) squeezed its way onto bookshelves as a complement to the 10-volume standard, *The Photographic History of the Civil War*, which was published in 1911. The *Image of War* series proved that there was plenty of room for another multi-volume compilation of Civil War photographs in terms of both new images and new scholarship.

In the past twenty years, scholars have published a steady flow of new books on specialized topics of Civil War photography, such as the images of particular cities, medical images, stereoscopic photos, and biographies of photographers, such as George Barnard, Alexander Gardner, John Carbutt, and others.

During that time span, the *Portraits of Conflict* series has spotlighted the Civil War images, primarily portraits, related to individual Southern states. The first was Arkansas (1987), followed by Louisiana (1990), Mississippi (1993), South Carolina (1995), North Carolina (1997), Texas (1998), and Georgia (1999).

After a gap of eight years, the series returns with its eighth volume, *Portraits of Conflict: A Photographic History of Tennessee in the Civil War* by Richard B. McCaslin, an associate professor of history at the University of North Texas. McCaslin also wrote the volumes on North and South Carolina and has written several other books on the Civil War.

McCaslin presents more than 250 portraits of Civil War soldiers ranging from the lowliest privates to the generals. Most are Tennesseans, but the book also includes out-of-staters, both Northerners and Southerners, who left their mark there, or shed their life's blood on Tennessee soil.

The stern visages of Iowa brothers Shelton and Frank Crosthwait, dressed in their Sunday finest, stare at us from a copy of an ambrotype undoubtedly taken before they left the Midwest in the spring of 1861 to come to Tennessee and enlist in the cause that would cost them their lives. After they joined the 20th Tennessee Infantry in June 1861, Shelton went down fighting the Yankees at Fishing Creek in eastern Kentucky in January 1862. Frank was killed at Murfreesboro in January 1863, his body discovered with one hand clutching the knotted pieces of handkerchief he had used in vain to try to stop the bleeding from a severed artery.

The *Portraits of Conflict* books make for terrific browsing, and the Tennessee volume is certainly no exception. As the reader turns the pages, and reads one profile to the next, he has no idea what fate has in store

for the next soldier, with the randomness of that fate on full display.

Here we have Daniel W. May Sr., who spent the better part of two years as a Yankee prisoner of war. The page that follows tells us about West Point graduate Lafayette Peck, who died of illness in 1864. Next comes Nathan C. Cooper, who spent twenty-eight bedridden weeks fighting illness, recovered long enough to be captured, again fell seriously ill, but ultimately survived into the twentieth century.

At age seventeen, John P. W. Brown was jailed by Federal authorities when he tried to slip away from Union-occupied Nashville to enlist in the Confederate army. Using a jackknife, Brown spent five days cutting a hole in the wall of his jail cell. He escaped, and was thought to have joined a Confederate cavalry unit, “though it has proven difficult to pinpoint which regiment,” McCaslin writes (p. 57). The best evidence that Brown in fact succeeded in his superhuman quest to join the Confederate army is the photograph that McCaslin has uncovered, which shows him in uniform, still bearing the rabbit-scared look of a hunted man.

The book is divided into ten chapters, and seven

of them cover Tennessee’s key moments of Civil War history—Secession, Shiloh, Murfreesboro, Chickamauga, Chattanooga, and Franklin. Each chapter includes a detailed essay running about ten pages that precedes the individual portraits and profiles. This feature extends the book’s reach beyond solely a photo history to include a narrative historical overview of the Civil War in Tennessee.

Two of the chapters cover Tennessee’s role in the fighting in Virginia and at Bentonville, North Carolina, while the book’s first chapter, simply entitled “Photography,” provides what is surely the most comprehensive summary yet published of photographers in Tennessee during the Civil War.

Although the book is almost exclusively a compilation of portraits, McCaslin does take a curious detour into documentary photographs to present a sprinkling of photos of naval vessels and river boats. A truly comprehensive photo history of the Civil War in Tennessee would include a wide array of the scores of other documentary photographs taken in the state during the war, particularly in and around Nashville, Knoxville, and Chattanooga. But the first word in the series title is “Portraits,” and McCaslin amply fulfills that assignment.

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