

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



David T. Hedrick, Gordon Barry Davis Jr., eds. *I'm Surrounded by Methodists ... Diary of John H.W. Stuckenberg, Chaplain of the 145th Pennsylvania*. Gettysburg, Penn.: Thomas Publications, 1995. 140 pp. \$16.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-939631-75-9.

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General readers and even professional historians are unlikely to greet the publication of a new Civil War diary with wild enthusiasm. After all, that shelf already sags under the weight of many fine volumes. John Stuckenberg's diary will not – and really should not – supplant other important published primary sources on required Civil War reading lists. On the other hand, it offers much of interest to both the casual reader and the Civil War specialist.

In September 1862, Stuckenberg, a German-born Lutheran pastor, left behind his flock in Erie, Pennsylvania, to serve with the 145th Pennsylvania volunteers. He began his diary the following month and kept at it, sporadically, until his resignation in September 1863. During his relatively short stint with the army, the twenty-eight-year-old chaplain witnessed quite a bit of the war. The 145th saw action at Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg (taking heavy casualties in the Wheatfield on the second day). In his letter of resignation, Stuckenberg pointed out that the regiment had been so badly depleted that his energies would be more useful back in Erie.

Several characteristics make this a book to be recommended. First, as the editors stress, in the absence of other documentation, Stuckenberg's diary must serve as the official regimental history. In fact, so many of the 145th's officers fell at Gettysburg that Stuckenberg authored the regiment's official after-action report of the battle. The diary is particularly useful for the regimental historian because the editors have gone to great lengths to provide meticulous endnotes, many of which trace the histories of the men of the 145th.

More broadly speaking, *I'm Surrounded by Methodists* provides an excellent portrait of the life of a Civil War

chaplain. When he was not ministering to the spiritual needs of the men, Stuckenberg remained active by nursing the sick and wounded, traveling to Washington in order to mail the regiment's pay home to their families, and generally assisting the 145th as a noncombatant. His comments about the men, and particularly about their apparent respect and affection for him, call to mind the more eloquent writings of the war's most famed noncombatant, Walt Whitman. Stuckenberg is particularly interesting when he critiques his fellow chaplains as a group of whiners who are of little use to the men or the army. In fact, the book's title is deceptive. It is the first part of a quote in which Stuckenberg describes a chaplains' meeting and notes that "I am surrounded by Methodist Chaplains..." (p. 56). Other than a few comments about Catholics, the Lutheran clergyman is less concerned with sectarian conflicts than the title might imply.

In addition to those characteristics that make the diary unusual, and therefore valuable, *I'm Surrounded by Methodists* is also a fine source for more general material about the soldier's life. Stuckenberg writes well and has an eye for events around him. Thus, the text is not filled – as such diaries often are – with seemingly endless comments about rain, mud, poor food and the like. The list of interesting nuggets is long. He has much to say about sickness and death, including occasional glimpses into army medical practices. Stuckenberg's descriptions of camp life are fairly thin, but often interesting. For instance, he includes a detailed description of a camp game in which the troops placed one of their number on a blanket and tossed him "15 feet or more" in the air (p. 112). As the regimental chaplain, Stuckenberg was concerned with the amount of gambling, cursing, and drinking among his men. This became particularly trou-

blesome in May 1863 when he learned that rumors had reached Erie “that in camp I was in the habit of drinking, a most malicious falsehood” (p. 68). By late 1863 draftees and substitutes had become more commonplace in the Union army. Stuckenberg offers many comments about these men, describing several episodes in which new arrivals sought his assistance in avoiding combat. In August Stuckenberg witnessed – and described in vivid detail – the execution of two deserters. The episode made him “sick and sad” even though he “felt that the execution for desertion was just” (p. 105).

Some of Stuckenberg’s most eloquent words were reserved for the events surrounding major battles. Before Fredericksburg, many of the men lined up to say goodbye to him, “with pale and trembling lips, and with deep earnestness feeling that they were to pass through a terrible ordeal –their first battle” (p. 41). After the fight he wrote: “A battle is indescribable, but once seen it haunts a man till the day of his death” (p. 44). In the midst of the battle of Chancellorsville, with Union troops fleeing a rebel advance, the chaplain found “within me a burning fire ready to burst forth in the most eloquent utterings.” He pushed his way past retreating troops to join his regiment at the front. “All saw I was no coward,” he reported, “and I was highly commended for my conduct” (p. 64). On several occasions Stuckenberg included his personal observations on the Union generals. He was, for instance, greatly disappointed in George G. Meade for letting Robert E. Lee slip away after Gettysburg: “Some men make mistakes in what they do, others manifest their greatest weakness in what they failed to undertake” (p. 91).

Stuckenberg often traveled to and from camp, and

some of his best entries depict life on the home front. He spent part of his Christmas leave in Washington, a city that “is said to be a very wicked place - full of bad men and lewd women” (p. 52). In November the bachelor chaplain revealed a deep longing for a wife and family while adding that “it will be years before love and marriage can be seriously thought of” (p. 32). The following summer he had numerous encounters with Virginia women, offering regular comments about their appearance and demeanor. While in Virginia, Stuckenberg revealed little interest in slavery and abolition, making periodic off-hand references to passing “darkies” without comment.

The editors of *I’m Surrounded by Methodists* have done an excellent job in bringing the diary to press. The introduction is strong and comprehensive, the endnotes superb, and the text is nicely illustrated with contemporary drawings and photographs. Several fine battlefield maps help the reader to place Stuckenberg’s accounts in broader perspective. The text is artfully divided into nine chronological chapters, with letters occasionally inserted where appropriate. These divisions, although logical, mask the diary’s major deficiency. Unlike a typical diary, many of the entries were written quite some time after the fact. For instance, Stuckenberg’s account of the events from May 24 through July 29, 1863, was recorded in a long entry written over several days in late July. This single extended entry, spanning three chapters and nearly a third of the text, lacks the immediacy that one would normally expect of a diary. Thus, readers and researchers should approach many passages with care, recognizing that they were not necessarily written in the heat of the moment. Nonetheless, this is a very interesting and useful volume.

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