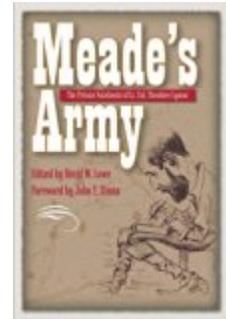


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Theodore Lyman.** *Meade's Army: The Private Notebooks of Lt. Col. Theodore Lyman.* Lowe. Civil War in the North Series. Kent: Kent State University Press, 2007. xviii + 518 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87338-901-3.

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## Private Notebooks No Longer

Civil War historians have long known that the letters of Army of the Potomac staff officer Lieutenant Colonel Theodore Lyman to his wife are an invaluable source for the study of the primary Union field army in the eastern theater. The Harvard-educated Lyman, the wealthy son of a former Boston mayor and connected by ties of blood and friendship with many of the Boston elite, served on the staff of General George Gordon Meade during most of that able but acerbic officer's tenure in command of the Army of the Potomac. Lyman's witty, keenly observant, and often scathing commentary accounted for the fame and usefulness of the published version of those letters, *Meade's Headquarters: Letters of Colonel Theodore Lyman from the Wilderness to Appomattox* (1922), edited by George R. Agassiz. David W. Lowe and Kent State University Press's Civil War in the North series have now performed a valuable service by producing a complementary volume including Lyman's private notebooks, in which he, at times, offered even more incisive and frank commentary than he did in his letters home.

Lyman's notebooks offer an extremely useful window into one of the most baffling problems faced by Civil War historians: What was wrong with the Army of the Potomac? With rare exceptions, like the Battle of Gettysburg, the North's largest army generally failed to win clear victories over their Confederate opponents until the final months of the war. While Meade's predecessors lost their positions and reputations due to a series of humiliating setbacks on the Peninsula, at Fredricksburg, at Chancellorsville, and elsewhere, the Union's western

armies won a seemingly unending series of victories, making the eastern defeats seem all the more disappointing and puzzling.

Contemporaries and historians have, at times, blamed the army's problems on its proximity to Washington, D.C., suggesting that micromanaging and political pressure from the president, the War Department, and Congress hamstrung its leaders. Perhaps, but Lyman's notebooks (which of course only deal with the latter part of the war, unfortunately) reveal little such interference, other than the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War's ongoing investigation of Meade's conduct at Gettysburg, which, at times, did seemingly border on harassment. Certainly General in Chief Henry W. Halleck, by this point, took a hands-off approach to the management of the army in the field. Plainly, though, the proximity to Washington was, if nothing else, a great source of annoyance to the army's commanders, as Lyman suggested, describing on one occasion how his patron General Meade "looked haggard and worried, for he had no sleep last night, and is bothered with abundance of good advice from Washington" (p. 38).

Some observers have also blamed the army's problems on an overly cautious, unaggressive mindset supposedly inculcated by its first commander, George B. McClellan. Again, this may be, but Lyman's perspective revealed a generally aggressive attitude and commitment to fighting on the offensive at army headquarters, though certainly experience had taught the commanders

that Robert E. Lee's Confederate Army of Northern Virginia would make them pay dearly for any mistakes, and so carelessness or incaution had to be avoided. Lyman's notebook suggested that the army's fundamental problem was an ineffective command structure and poor discipline in the officer corps, what might almost be called a culture of disobedience. The cantankerous Meade was often at odds with his subordinates, and, even more frequently, found it remarkably difficult to get his orders carried out. At Mine Run in 1863, for instance, Meade's subordinate Gouverneur K. Warren essentially vetoed Meade's planned attack on Confederate lines by refusing to act on his orders and allowing the moment that such an assault could conceivably have succeeded (before Confederate efforts to strengthen the position were too far advanced) to pass. Meade's general response to such insubordination, to Lyman's dismay, was essentially to accept it, while making an occasional show of temper to assuage his frustration. As Abraham Lincoln had warned Joseph Hooker in 1863, after the general's intriguing had enabled him to topple Ambrose Burnside from the army's command, the legacy of a factionalized, self-serving officer corps would make his job much more difficult.

Lyman also suggested that the long, hard years of slow promotion in the prewar army through which many officers suffered produced an almost obsessive need for those men to protect their reputations and career advancement at almost any cost, which he deplored as the "jealous disposition of the old army officers" (p. 101). Commanding this army was no easy assignment, and while Lyman offered a very favorable assessment on the whole of his sometimes maligned friend Meade, reading these notebooks provides a reminder of what a difficult assignment that officer had and what an imperfect organization he presided over. Still, perhaps historians have made too much of the Army of the Potomac's bad luck and misfortune—they did face a most formidable and well-led opponent, and ultimately triumphed. Lyman's account reveals much of the talent and bravery that made that victory possible, as well as the squabbling and chaos with which the army is more commonly associated.

Lyman's perspective, though intelligent and acute, is very much that of a man of his time, place, and social class. He frequently expressed nativist and racist sentiments, commonly using most offensive epithets. His worry over what he saw as the excessive consumption of alcohol by many officers reflects the intense concern of the upper class in the mid-nineteenth century with maintaining the social order during a period of vast change and urban growth. He was critical of soldiers who he

perceived as motley urban roughs, especially in some prominent New York-recruited III Corps units, like Dan Sickles's "Excelsior Brigade," whose men he accused of being fond of (and frequently caught in possession of) pornography "of an extraordinary depth of foulness" (p. 125). But the Brahmin Lyman also expressed contempt for ill-mannered "bourgeoisie," like the wife of financier Jay Cooke, and after mingling at a social event with such upstarts and inferiors wrote of his preference that rigid class divisions be maintained and observed. While much recent scholarly attention has focused on the Civil War ultimately resulting in a "new birth of freedom" and broader commitment to democracy, Lyman's notebooks remind us that this was far from an uncontested or easy transition—even among those committed to the war for national survival.

Interestingly, Lyman commented almost obsessively on the physical appearance and dress of officers and men who he encountered, seeing these qualities as evidence of character and self-discipline—or the lack thereof. "One has only to look at the [Army of the Potomac's] cavalry," he wrote, widely regarded for much of the war as ineffective, "to see, how, (in most cases) slovenliness and want of order maybe become the rule. These details, trifling in appearance, assume great importance when added together" (p. 79). Even the fastidious Lyman, however, found humor in Winfield Scott Hancock's affectation of always wearing a clean white shirt, even while on active campaign.

The publishers are to be commended for generously including Lyman's maps and sketches, which greatly enhance the text's clarity. The editor deserves praise as well for his very thorough annotations—so thorough, indeed, that the volume's inclusion of endnotes (rather than footnotes), while sometimes awkward due to the page-flipping that it entails, was probably wise, since otherwise the lengthy notes would likely have been intrusive. The index, however, could have used greater attention. The entry for "Charles Fremont" robs the Republican Party's 1856 presidential candidate and later unsuccessful Union general of his first name as well as the accent mark that he added to his last name; Robert Hoke was a Confederate, not a Union general; the Battle of "Sailer's Creek" was actually Sayler's Creek; Henry Slocum's middle initial was "W"; and why no entry for the colorful Union General P. R. de Trobriand, who is mentioned in the text? (Another unfair slight to this able but often overlooked officer.) All in all, however, this is a very fine addition to a valuable series, and should be warmly received by Civil War historians.

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