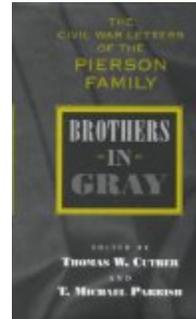


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Thomas W. Cutrer, T. Michael Parrish, eds. *Brothers in Gray: The Civil War Letters of the Pierson Family*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997. xii + 269 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2134-4.

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Like many southern families, the Piersons of Bienville Parish, Louisiana, sent more than one son into the Confederate army. Ultimately, four of the family's boys wore the gray—three in the western theatre and one in the east. What makes this family special is that so many of the sons' letters have survived to today. Historians Thomas W. Cutrer and T. Michael Parrish have now compiled and edited the Pierson letters in this interesting book.

In a short introduction, the editors describe the Pierson family and their north Louisiana home. Prosperous for the area, they were small slave owners, well educated, and strong Unionists. But like many other Unionists, the family joined the southern cause once war came. David Pierson, who was living in Winn Parish, raised a company of volunteers known as the Winn Rifles, 3rd Louisiana Volunteers, and was elected its captain. A younger brother, James, joined David's company when it was at Vicksburg, but there are relatively few letters from him. The family's oldest son, Henry, joined the 27th Louisiana, but none of his letters are included in the book. Interestingly, all three of these brothers were captured when Vicksburg fell in July 1863.

A fourth brother, Reuben, joined the Bienville Blues and became part of Col. Richard Taylor's 9th Louisiana Volunteers. Reuben was elected sergeant and accompanied the regiment to Virginia, where he eventually became company captain. After seeing much hard service, Reuben was mortally wounded on the picket line in July 1864.

The brothers' letters are arranged chronologically, with the writings of Reuben and David accounting for the bulk of the correspondence. Like other Civil War collections, there are many letters written during the early

part of the war, but their number dwindles after the capture of Vicksburg. One remarkable fact, however, is that Reuben continued to send letters across the Mississippi River from Virginia until his death in the summer of 1864. Each of his post-Vicksburg missives details how he took advantage of soldiers getting leave and entrusting them to hand-deliver his letters once they sneaked across the river.

The Pierson collection is long on camp life, rumors, marches, and private thoughts, and, with a few exceptions, short on battle details. David's letters are most valuable for their depiction of army life in the Trans-Mississippi Department and for their description of the early stages of the Vicksburg campaign. Sickness, deprivations, and uncertainty were the norm for the 3rd Louisiana as it was sent to Arkansas early in the war. David narrowly escaped death in his first battle, at Wilson's Creek. He wrote home, "The first fire of the enemy brought down three of my Company in a few feet of where I was standing..." (p. 41). Despite this victory, in early 1862, the Confederates were forced to retreat from Fayetteville on a dreadful march. David claimed, "For three days we have been without bread & have subsisted on boiled meat, raw turnips, and parched corn" (p. 81).

The 3rd Louisiana was transferred to Mississippi later in the year and fought at Iuka, where David was severely wounded. At Vicksburg, in early 1863, the regiment was first stationed on the Yazoo River. Having been promoted to major, David wrote some descriptive letters of General Ulysses S. Grant's bayou expeditions and of the artillery duels between the rebel batteries and Union gunboats. After the Yankees surrounded Vicksburg, David's letters cease. The regiment fought gallantly, and David again

was badly wounded, but he left no account of his actions there.

After Vicksburg, David was promoted to lieutenant colonel and commanded the 3rd Louisiana until it was disbanded at Shreveport in May 1865. His last letters depict the uncertainty and boredom of garrison duty as the Confederacy collapsed.

The majority of the book's letters come from Reuben, who rose from sergeant to captain of Company C, 9th Louisiana Volunteers. Reuben was a determined rebel who frequently wrote of his willingness to die for the cause. Late in the war, he proclaimed, "Sooner I would die and leave my bones to bleach in the sunshine ... than have my [family] insulted by brutish and inhuman wretches who now march beneath the folds of the once proud but now dishonored and degraded emblem of American freedom" (p. 233).

Reuben saw heavy combat under Generals Thomas J. Jackson and Robert E. Lee. After Gaines' Mill, he wrote home that "the dead lay almost thick enough in some places to have walked on. The scene was one never to be forgotten" (p. 101). About a month later, he again penned, "I have seen the dead and wounded lying in piles, the ground literally covered with blood. I have heard the groans of the dying, piteously crying for help.... Everything is very different from what I had imagined it to be..." (p. 112).

Reuben's letters reveal much about everyday camp life in the Army of Northern Virginia. What particularly struck this reader were his frequent assertions of how high morale remained, even after Gettysburg and far into the Overland campaign. In June 1864, Reuben wrote, "Grant has got a good deal nearer to Richmond than he

was when he fought us in the wilderness but our army is just as far from being whipped now as it was then and from all accounts the yankees are pretty badly whipped now and if they dont mind they will be whipped wors [sic] than they hav [sic] ever been before they get out of this" (p. 239).

Like any good captain, Reuben bragged on his "boys" and seemed to be a popular officer. He worried when they went barefoot and anguished over the fate of the missing and those taken prisoner. While discussing his men, Reuben once casually addressed a point that historians rarely consider. Claiming that his company suffered fewer casualties in battle than other companies, Reuben wrote that it was partly because "our men are all accustomed to the use of fire arms and do not shoot each other, while other companies ... are as awkward with a gun as a ten year old boy and consequently are greater to be feared than our enemies" (p. 200). It is such small details that make this book well worth reading.

Cutrer and Parrish have a gem of a book. The introduction is appropriate, but not drawn out, and the footnotes (yes, thankfully, LSU Press still uses footnotes and not endnotes) identify people and events without being too intrusive. The editors allow the Piersons to tell their story without overwhelming the reader with detail. An occasional error does creep into the notes, but not to the point of weakening the book. The Pierson letters tell a story worth reading. Few readers will come away from the book without learning a number of new details about life in the Confederate army.

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