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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Thomas P. Lowry. *The Story the Soldiers Wouldn't Tell: Sex in the Civil War*. Mechanicsburg, Pa.: Stackpole Books, 1994. xiv + 209 pp. \$19.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8117-1515-7.

Reviewed by Mark D. Van Ells (CUNY-Queensborough)
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Very few people link the subjects of sex and the American Civil War, despite the fact that wartime mobilizations raise numerous gender and personal issues. In *The Story the Soldiers Wouldn't Tell: Sex in the Civil War*, Dr. Thomas P. Lowry, a one-time staff member of the Masters and Johnson Clinic, links the two issues and produces an informative work about the private lives of soldiers and other Americans during the Civil War era.

The sexual history of the Civil War is a hidden one, according to Lowry. Due to Victorian morality and the intensely personal nature of the subject, soldiers and other Americans seldom discussed the topic in their letters, diaries, and memoirs. Newspaper accounts and government records—particularly those of courts-martial and medical officers—reveal somewhat more. Few scholars examine these sources for sexual information, Lowry claims, due in part to a desire not to “taint” what many view as a sacred event in American history. In his attempt to shed light on this neglected topic, Lowry explores a wide range of sex-related subjects, including romance, prostitution, homosexuality, rape, venereal diseases, and even vulgar language.

The work's main weakness is the fragmentary nature of its sources. Lowry's discussion of homosexual behavior among soldiers illustrates this problem. The author found no cases in which army men had been discharged for homosexual acts, and only two cases from the navy. However, he uses Walt Whitman's diary to suggest that liaisons between men may have occurred fairly often. To the author's credit, he recognizes the limitations of his sources and does not overstate his arguments. Indeed, Lowry seems reluctant to explore the implications of the information he has unearthed. For example, he notes that African-American women seem to have been the more

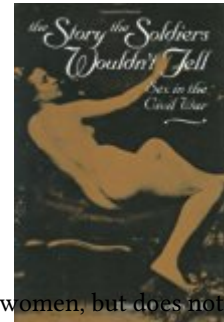
frequent victims of rape than white women, but does not speculate about why this may have been the case, or what it said about race relations during the period. Instead, the work often reads more like a compilation of notes than an analysis of the evidence.

Lowry nevertheless has written a valuable work. The author examines the Civil War in fresh new ways. Much of what he uncovers will be of interest to historians of many different disciplines. For example, he explores America's first experiment with legalized prostitution, which took place under the supervision of the U.S. Army in Nashville, Tennessee during the federal occupation of that city. Also interesting is a chapter on venereal diseases among soldiers, of which the military recorded nearly 200,000 cases. Readers should be warned that the discussions and illustrations in the book are sometimes rather explicit, but the author handles such matters in a scholarly and professional manner.

It was perhaps with sexual matters in mind that Whitman made his oft-quoted remark that history would not record the real Civil War, but Lowry takes a significant step toward proving the poet at least partially wrong. *The Story the Soldiers Wouldn't Tell* is a treasure of new information about the Civil War, and an excellent starting point for further inquiry into the private lives of Americans during the nineteenth century.

Wisconsin Veterans Museum Mark D. Van Ells

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