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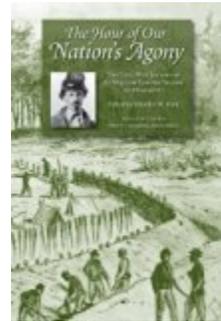
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jennifer W. Ford, ed. *The Hour of Our Nation's Agony: The Civil War Letters of Lt. William Cowper Nelson of Mississippi*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007. xxii + 336 pp. \$48.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57233-567-7.

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Mississippi Was Always on His Mind

The Hour of Our Nation's Agony is a compilation of letters written by and to Lieutenant William Cowper Nelson from his prewar years at the University of Mississippi through the end of the Civil War. Jennifer W. Ford has done an excellent job editing this collection that lets us read about Nelson's progression from a young man in college to a battle-hardened veteran.

The book opens with letters from Nelson's college years, including one from W. R. Stearns advising Nelson not to go to Yale where he would be forced to endure, "day after day, for years, the studied insults which your fellow students, your instructors, and the fanatical people of Connecticut will be continually heaping upon you" (p. 6). His letters from this period reflect the common concerns of an average college student not only of the mid-nineteenth century but also of today. Nelson's mother inquired constantly about his health, while he asked for news from home, and, of course, persistently pleaded for money. The approaching crisis rarely appeared in his correspondence until late in 1860, when just before the presidential election Nelson wrote "that in the event of Lincoln's election there will be a dissolution of the Union" (p. 12).

Nelson was twenty years old when he left the University of Mississippi to join Company B, Ninth Mississippi Infantry Regiment. The regiment received orders to move to Pensacola, Florida, as a defense against Union forces holding Fort Pickens. Nelson's mother expressed

her fear of the temptations with which her son would be faced, while he constantly reassured her that he "will do nothing that you or my Father would be ashamed of" (p. 28). His early letters are filled with news of friends from his hometown of Holly Springs as they drifted in and out of the Pensacola area, along with descriptions of the country through which he passed, even sending a box of seashells home. These letters contain the bravado of the early days of the conflict. He wrote that "they [the Federals] know that they cannot whip us out," and feared that "the fighting will be over before we get a showing" (pp. 39, 40). Even his first experience "seeing the elephant" in October of 1861 did not seem to have dulled his enthusiasm. In a letter to his mother, he noted: "I don't think I felt the emotion of fear during the whole conflict" (p. 69).

In the new year, Nelson became a member of the 17th Mississippi Infantry Regiment, part of the Army of Northern Virginia and located right in the path of Union General George B. McCellan's Army of the Potomac outside of Richmond, Virginia. Nelson emerged unscathed from the Seven Days Battles, writing to his brother that "I have been in a big battle, and I can tell you that it is not much fun" (p. 94). His letters rarely mentioned slavery as an institution, with the exception of a letter from October 1862. Perhaps as a response to the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, Nelson wrote to his mother that "I have thought that this war was ordered by Providence, as a means of settling definitely and conclusively

the question of slavery ... if on the contrary, slavery is a curse and obnoxious to an All Wise and Good Creator I believe that he will make this war, the means of abolishing it from the face of the earth” (p. 102).

In January 1863, Nelson received a promotion to 2nd lieutenant and transferred to General Carnot Posey’s Brigade. His letters from this period reflect an additional concern as Union forces began operating in and around Holly Springs. In a letter to his mother dated February 1863, after Federal forces had occupied the town, Nelson indicated that he “could not restrain feelings of the bitterest hatred ... and my heart yearned for the privilege of meeting in battle, those worse than heathen vandals” (p. 118). Even defeat at Gettysburg did not shake Nelson’s belief in victory as he wrote to his mother that “the Army of Northern Virginia cannot be routed” (p. 128).

The final years of the war brought with it changes to Nelson’s correspondence. In April 1864, he wrote to his father that the army was in excellent spirits, but “it is not the boastful confidence in our own strength, which we had in the Pennsylvania campaign, but a calm trustfulness in our ability, through the blessing of God, to put at naught, the wicked plans of the Enemy for our destruction” (p. 152). Even one month into the Overland Campaign, however, Nelson still saw Confederate victory, stating that “until that army is beaten, he will never gain possession of the Confederate capital,” and again one month later in a letter to his mother, he noted that “the Yankees can never capture Richmond or defeat Gen [Robert E.] Lee, by destroying Rail Roads” (pp. 157, 159). But there is a more fatalistic trend here, if not for the Confederacy, at least for him. He wrote to his father “that we may all be re-united there, if not in this world, is my daily prayer” (p. 160). He also tried to dissuade his brother from joining the army telling him that “a soldier’s life, that is the life of a private soldier, is an awful

one” (p. 163).

Ford ends the book with a brief overview of Nelson’s life after the war, and includes an excellent section with brief biographies of Mississippi soldiers and politicians who were mentioned in the letters. The endnotes, however, could have used a more thorough editing. There are some minor errors; for example, General George Meade’s name is misspelled twice and the date of the Battle of Atlanta is listed as July 22, 1863 (pp. 302, 306, 252). There are also more substantial problems. In the biographical note on James “Jeb” Stuart, Ford writes that “he went on to fame as commander of Lee’s 2nd Corps after the death of General Thomas Jonathan ‘Stonewall’ Jackson”—a post Stuart only held for days (p. 279). Later, she writes that “Lincoln replaced Meade with Ulysses S. Grant in the spring of 1864” (p. 306). Grant was promoted to Lt. General and given command of all Union armies and Meade remained commander of the Army of the Potomac through the remainder of the conflict. Most troubling, however, is Ford’s reference to “Grant’s forces suffer[ing] seven thousand casualties in one hour” (p. 311). Ford uses Gordon C. Rhea’s *Cold Harbor* as a source but fails to use his updated numbers, which show 3,500 casualties for the charge to be more accurate than the 7,000 figure.[1]

These slight criticisms aside, Ford should be complemented for an excellent addition to Civil War literature. The research pertinent not only to Nelson’s family but also to all the soldiers from the Holly Springs area is invaluable. *The Hour of Our Nation’s Agony* is an important addition to studies of the Army of Northern Virginia as well as the lives of the common soldier.

Note

[1]. Gordon C. Rhea, *Cold Harbor: Grant and Lee, May 26 – June 3, 1864* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 362.

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