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Robert Patrick Bender. *Like Grass before the Scythe: The Life and Death of Sgt. William Remmel, 121st New York Infantry.* Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007. xiv + 177 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8173-1552-8.

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The Maturation of a Civil War Soldier

The experience of the common soldier is a favorite subject of Civil War literature. Robert Patrick Bender's *Like Grass before the Scythe* is a worthy addition to this genre. The letters of Sergeant William Remmel offer an insightful portrait of the life of a soldier in the Army of the Potomac. During the term of his service, Remmel matured in many ways, and Bender's work provides us with the opportunity to understand the effects of war on the common Civil War soldier. However, the book is not without limitations, which keep it from being a much more useful and accessible work for a general audience.

Any discussion of Bender's work needs to begin with the book's subject. Remmel was a young volunteer of German heritage from upstate New York who enlisted in the 121st New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment in the summer of 1862. Remmel's letters prove him to be a literate and intelligent correspondent. His letters home thoroughly described the life of the common soldier, including all of the monotony of camp life as well as his experiences in combat. Remmel wrote his parents and family faithfully until his disappearance after the Battle of Cedar Creek in October 1864. Although Remmel's family was unable to definitively determine his fate, they believe that in all likelihood he was captured by the Confederates and died in captivity.

The portrait of Remmel offered by his letters is one of a young man who grew up in many ways during his service in the Army of the Potomac. Remmel's attitudes about the conduct of the war developed as he gained experience as a soldier. In 1862, Remmel's initial thoughts on the conduct of the war did not seem to recognize the sacrifices that the Army of the Potomac and the Union would have to make to achieve victory. For example, in a letter written in November 1862, Remmel mentioned that he disliked orders "which were issued in regard to protecting the property of the inhabitants" and that he believed the war should be prosecuted in a manner that would "show our enemies that we can destroy as well as they" (pp. 15, 16). These thoughts portray a soldier who wanted to see the Confederacy punished and brought back into the Union, but Remmel's early correspondence did not recognize or dwell on the toll that would be extracted from him and his comrades.

As Remmel gained experience and saw combat with the Army of the Potomac, his attitudes about the war became much more realistic and began to dwell on the cost of the war. On March 18, 1864, Remmel wrote that the "bloody work of destroying [Robert E.] Lee's army, which will cause an ocean [of] blood to be spilled on both sides," was going to be the price necessary to ensure Union victory (p. 98). Remmel evinced a lack of sympathy for Union "Copperheads," and he was concerned that a victory for Democrat George McClellan in the presidential elections would bring about such a settlement. Remmel was not interested in a peace with the Confederacy that "would let the rebels go if they choose" and waste the sacrifice of Union soldiers in the field (p. 126). Thus, by 1864, Remmel's attitudes about the conduct of the war seemed to have developed in much the same way as those of the Union political and military leadership.

Remmel's letters also provide evidence of the personal maturation of this young man. In reading his correspondence, one can see him assuming more responsibility with his family. Remmel's letters contain words of advice to his parents and siblings regarding the benefits of education and the need to find satisfying employment. Of particular interest is advice Remmel provided to his parents shortly before his death that counseled against the enlistment of his younger brother in the Union army. Although unsuccessful in preventing his younger brother's enlistment, the dialogue between Remmel and his parents established Remmel's increasing position of importance within the family hierarchy. Thus, along with his maturity as a soldier, his personal

maturity was just beginning to flourish before his life was cut short.

Bender has done a great deal of research into the service records of the 121st New York Infantry and the local records of the communities where Remmel's family lived. He provides generous endnotes that contain detailed information regarding Remmel, his family, and other soldiers and officers of the regiment. Bender also includes a few brief summaries of Remmel's life and wartime service at logical milestones within the book.

However, these endnotes and summaries do not remedy an important omission in Bender's work. Bender fails to provide the reader with the context for understanding Remmel's service within the larger story of the Army of the Potomac. If Bender had provided some detail on the activities of the Army of the Potomac and the political and leadership issues it faced, then the reader would have been better able to understand and appreciate Remmel's service. An example of this kind of missed opportunity appears in the treatment of Remmel's participation in the Battle of Gettysburg. Other than some brief endnotes, Bender provides little detail concerning Remmel's activities during the battle. We do have Remmel's account of his actions, which are contained in a single letter to his brother Caleb, but this letter provides little information about the fighting or the movements of the Army of the Potomac beyond Remmel's line of sight. Bender's structure provides no context within which to place Remmel's activities within the larger battle or within the strategic debates that still linger about the Battle of Gettysburg. Remmel's letter to his brother states that rumors within the army indicated that George Gordon "Meade intends to head off Lee at Richmond and give him battle" (p. 49). However, Bender does not discuss the issue of Meade's failure to aggressively pursue Lee contrary to these rumors. It seems that Bender missed a wonderful opportunity to craft a work that integrated the history of the Army of the Potomac into the life of Remmel. As it stands now, Remmel seems strangely dissociated from the major events in which the Army of the Potomac participated.

Missed opportunities aside, Bender's work does accomplish its main task of placing the life and service of Remmel before the reader. *Like Grass before the Scythe* is recommended to those who would like a deeper understanding of the thoughts and concerns of a rank-and-file Union soldier. Remmel's letters put a very real and human face on the life of the Civil War soldier, and Bender has done us a great service in making these letters available to students of the Civil War.

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