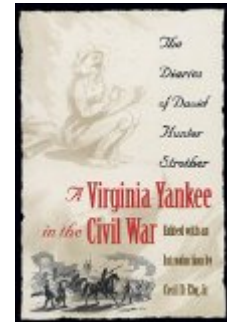


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Hunter Strother. *A Virginia Yankee in the Civil War: The Diaries of David Hunter Strother*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. xx + 294 pp. \$15.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4757-2.

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## Soldiers' War Journals: Couldn't They be More Than Just Military History?

As Cecil Eby states in his introduction, “there are thousands of eyewitness narratives of the war” and “only a very small number have attained or will ever attain anything resembling classic stature” (p. xi). Those works that fail to attain classic stature usually do so either because they are too narrow or too broad: either the diarist fails to put his experiences into a larger and more meaningful context, or the diarist only provides an overview of larger events without providing any sense of their effect on the individual. The diary of David Hunter Strother is a classic, Eby insists, because it is neither too narrow nor too broad. Rather, it conveys both the immediacy of the war to individual soldiers as well as the larger meaning of the fratricidal conflict for American society. Moreover, Strother, who before the war was a contributor to *Harper's Monthly*, wrote about the war “as it was, not as it ought to have been” (p. xii), recording whatever struck his fancy at the moment. Thus, descriptions of the horror of battle and finding dead and wounded soldiers lying festering in the fields are followed by accounts of pleasant dinners at a local tavern. It is Strother's willingness to deal with his own humanity along with his penchant for realism and a clear writing style, Eby argues, that makes *A Virginia Yankee in the Civil War* a valuable tool for historians as well as a “good read” for the general populace.

And Eby is partially right. *A Virginia Yankee in the Civil War* is a valuable tool, at least for military historians, and a good read. Strother's diary, which covers the period from February, 1862 to October 15, 1864, aptly shows the evolution of one man's feelings regard-

ing the experience of war and its inhumanity, slavery and its demise, and the sectional division of the Union. Strother, like many others, began the war in high spirits, expecting victory over the Confederates even though he respected the considerable talent and ability of his opponents, many of whom had been friends or acquaintances of his in pre-war Virginia. By the end of the war, however, he was filled with disgust for not only the war itself, but also for the combatants, having witnessed atrocities by both Union and Confederate troops on the battlefield as well as against civilians on the southern homefront. Strother's musings also poignantly reveal the hardening effects of participation in such a destructive war. For example, early in his journal, Strother painfully describes the post-battle scene at Kernstown in March, 1862: “The bodies lay among the bushes and trees just as they fell, and were without exception shot through the head with musket balls. The sun had set and the dull red light from the west fell upon the upturned faces of the dead, giving a lurid dimness to the scene that highlighted its ghastly effect” (p. 19). Only six months later, after the battle of Antietam, he writes, “The dead lay so thick that the lane was choked with them. Here Sturgis had them thrown aside to move his artillery forward. Their trappings were stripped off by the soldiers for mementoes of the battle. These dead were all killed with musketry and lay in all possible positions, some with countenances distorted, hands grasping leaves and sticks, other placid and one with a pleasant smile on his face. Squalid, filthy, and bloodstained as all these corpses were, there were some splendid specimens of manhood among them, tall, hand-

some, athletic fellows with well-turned features” (p. 108). Besides the noticeable change in Strother’s tone, there is also a shift in how he regards the dead. No longer are they people whose death is a tragic event requiring quiet reflection. Rather, they are “specimens of manhood” who are choking the lane and in the way. Just as Sturgis, “had them thrown aside,” so too did Strother throw them aside in his conscience.

While Strother’s diary is certainly valuable for what it says about military life and war, Eby contends that it is also important for how it reflects the “moods of the age” (p. xiii). Interestingly and unfortunately, however, he edits out many things that might have shed light on such topics. In his introduction, he states that “predictions of things never to come, summaries of personal letters and telegrams, ... digressions on family and neighbors, reconstructions of dreams, irrelevant conversations, and the like” (p. xv) are omitted. While not every digression on a friend or family member or recounting of a personal letter would necessarily be revealing, the reader is often left feeling cheated by their omission. For example, on May 10, 1863, Strother receives an unexpected visit from his wife. Certainly, his feelings at seeing her after so long an absence would have revealed much about his overall experience of the war and the mood of the age. Yet, Eby includes only, “At the hotel a servant called and informed me that a lady wished to see me in the reception room. ‘What sort of lady?’ The servant said, ‘She’s your wife.’ This was a most unexpected pleasure. She had got

my first telegram from New York and had started that night” (p. 181). Strother’s account of their first reunion or his feelings about it are edited out entirely. In other cases, his musings on old friends or American society as a whole are cut short by editorial ellipses. While such things might not interest military historians, they do appeal to historians investigating the social ramifications of the war. Though perhaps not published in the heyday of social history, Eby’s original edition of Strother’s journal did emerge in the 1960s, the beginning of the social history revolution. Accordingly, he had a chance to make this diary important on several levels. Instead, he took the easy way out, omitting things he deemed “unnecessary” to an understanding of the war. Certainly everything cannot be included in a work of this sort, and it is the editor’s job to determine what is necessary and unnecessary. But it is a pity that a war journal with such potential to become more than just military history was shortchanged by editorial decisions. Strother’s published diaries as edited by Eby are indeed a good read and an invaluable source for military historians; however, they were allowed to say very little to disciplines outside of military history.

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