



Steven J. Ramold. *Baring the Iron Hand: Discipline in the Union Army*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010. xii + 493 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87580-408-8.

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Published on H-CivWar (June, 2010)

Commissioned by Matthew E. Mason

## Re-evaluating Discipline and Manhood in the Union Army

Scholars of Civil War soldiers often portray the volunteers of the Union Army as generally self-controlled and moral men whose self-imposed discipline helped achieve victory in the war. A different picture emerges in Steven J. Ramold's *Baring the Iron Hand: Discipline in the Union Army*. His book is an in-depth study of discipline and military justice that utilizes extensive research in a variety of sources, including a sample of 5,000 general courts-martial cases. This is the most comprehensive examination of the topic to date, and his conclusions alter the picture of Northern soldiers and officers.

The Union Army, according to Ramold's depiction, was an insubordinate, drunken, pillaging mass that maintained just enough discipline to be victorious. Soldiers and officers saw themselves as citizen-soldiers who maintained certain rights and privileges, particularly the right to independence of speech and action and the right to drink. Ideals of manhood reinforced the disciplinary problems of the Union Army. Many volunteers expected to indulge in the freedoms of "bachelor manhood" during their time of service. Additionally, Ramold claims that the rough nature of army life and disillusionment with war created a flexible morality among soldiers and officers who came to accept behaviors that they would have rejected in civilian life.

The result was a constant battle between soldiers and the institutional standards and controls of the army. Ramold chronicles a catalog of both questionable and militarily criminal behavior that characterized Northern troops: among them profanity, drinking, gambling, discharging firearms, insubordination, mutiny, going AWOL, theft, and pillaging. The sheer scale of offenses made it impossible for the army to curb entirely the soldiers' behavior. Indeed, Ramold argues that the army responded by relaxing its standards as laid out in the regulations and the Articles of War. Military discipline and justice during the Civil War became flexible and accom-

modated the changing reality of what the army could realistically expect from soldiers.

*Baring the Iron Hand* also offers an assessment of the regimental discipline enforced by officers and of general courts-martial. Soldiers most often experienced discipline in the form of policies and punishments handed out by officers at the regimental level. Ramold describes the relationship between officers and soldiers in the Union Army as a "stalemate," with neither group able to dominate the other (p. 44). Officers tended to emphasize humiliation and physical discomfort when they punished soldiers, but had to walk a careful line lest their punishments outrage soldiers and instigate riots or mutiny. At the level of general courts-martial, Ramold characterizes the process as "flexible and lenient" (p. 302). The system allowed for legal interpretation, latitude to take circumstances into account, clemency, review, and appeal that ensured "proper justice in the vast majority of cases" (p. 342). According to Ramold's sample of cases, Union courts were generally lenient. They handed out relatively few death sentences and in a significant number of cases that warranted a severe sentence instead handed out the minimum punishment allowed by law. Neither did courts-martial become harsher as the war progressed, as measured either by the percentage of soldiers found guilty or by the punishments inflicted by the courts. Indeed, Ramold partially attributes the endemic desertion rates in the Union Army to the army's refusal to punish harshly the men who committed the crime. When courts-martial punished soldiers, regardless of the crime, humiliation was the cornerstone. Army penalties were public rituals designed to disgrace the offender and to impress observers in order to deter similar behavior.

Ramold concludes his study by arguing that Civil War soldiers, through their battle against the institutional norms of the army, forced reforms in army regulations and discipline in the postbellum era. Because of their

citizen-soldier ethos and their need to demonstrate manhood, volunteers “challenged the collective expectation of soldier behavior and the written army regulations.... The army could only cope by changing its disciplinary system lest it face a collapse of discipline altogether” (p. 395). Union soldiers had enough discipline to win the war, but ultimately the army did not discipline them effectively. Instead, it was the army that changed to accommodate the volunteers.

The balanced use of sources in the research for this book—extensive manuscript collections of letters, diaries, and newspapers, as well as various types of military records—answers the potential criticism that the nature of the sources determined the conclusions (of course the army would seem undisciplined if one examined the records related to the men who were undisciplined). Ramold makes a strong case for the epidemic indiscipline of the Union Army and the flexible nature of military justice. Despite the thorough nature of his work, however, a few questions remain. Was there a difference between the behavior and officers’ treatment of volunteers and that of the later conscripts? Some recent research suggests that there was, but Ramold does not examine this potentially significant issue.[1] Some answers to this question might be found in regimental order books that contain regimental orders and regimental and field officer courts-martial records. Yet despite his otherwise thorough research, there is a paucity of evidence from regimental order books in the endnotes. Considering that most discipline in the Union Army occurred at the regimental level, this is a surprising oversight. Often when Ramold makes statements about how officers implemented discipline, such as his discussion of solutions to the discharging of weapons (p. 106) or of the use of intimidation and physical punishment to control the alcohol problem (p. 146), he cites only letters and diaries. A clear analysis of regimental orders and regimental courts-martial within the text and substantiated by evidence would have strengthened conclusions about discipline at the regimental level.

Another question is whether military discipline changed over time. Although Ramold makes the case that military justice did not become harsher, he measures harshness by the percentage of men found guilty and the “relative percentages of the most frequent punishments” (p. 328). However, his statistics indicate that the number of courts-martial increased as the war progressed and the death penalty was applied in greater numbers. Additionally, there is no clear analysis of how discipline and the relationship between officers and soldiers evolved, if at all, at the regimental level, which is where most disci-

pline and punishment occurred.

*Baring the Iron Hand* also raises questions about gender, although answering those questions was outside the purpose and scope of the book. Ramold’s evidence relates to ongoing questions about how historians should characterize the manhood ideals of Civil War Northerners. Ramold attributes much of the volunteers’ misbehavior to their views of manliness, and he uses broad generalizations that are common in the secondary literature on gender. For instance, Ramold makes the sweeping statement that strict Victorian morality “was the norm for upper and middle classes and the goal of the lower classes” (p. 80). Recent scholarship—not to mention the behavior of the men in his study—raises serious doubts about that statement. [2] Ramold provides a two-fold explanation for the seeming contradiction between the behavior of Union soldiers and the supposedly widespread moral and self-controlled manhood ideal. Again drawing on the work of gender scholars, Ramold describes an alternative model of “masculinity” and “bachelor manhood” (p. 5) in Northern society that allowed men more freedom and wildness. Soldiers claimed that model once they entered the army. Additionally, he argues that the stark realities of war and declining dedication to the cause undermined commitment to the Victorian model among many soldiers and officers. Whether or not there was a declining dedication is unclear, since Ramold never explicitly addresses how his evidence disproves James McPherson’s assertion, which was based on more extensive research into letters and diaries, that volunteers remained committed to the cause. But certainly Ramold provides ample evidence of the widespread presence of Union soldiers and officers whose behavior challenged the precepts of morality and restraint. Although the concept of manhood is central to this book, it is a tool that Ramold uses to explain and analyze the disciplinary problems in the army. *Baring the Iron Hand* is ultimately a work of military history, not gender history, and its focus is rightfully discipline and military justice. However, Ramold’s study demonstrates that gender historians have more work to do in order to understand the clearly complicated and perhaps changing views of manhood that Northern men held.

#### Notes

[1]. Michael T. Smith, “The Most Desperate Scoundrels Unhung: Bounty Jumpers and Recruitment Fraud in the Civil War North,” *American Nineteenth Century History* 6 (June 2005). Gerald F. Linderman, in *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), argued

that discipline in the Union Army became increasing severe and that it targeted the post-1862 conscripts.

*Antebellum American Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Lorien Foote, *The Gentlemen and the Roughs: Manhood, Honor, and Violence in the Union Army* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

[2]. Amy S. Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the*

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**Citation:** Lorien Foote. Review of Ramold, Steven J., *Baring the Iron Hand: Discipline in the Union Army*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. June, 2010.

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