



James Parks Caldwell. *A Northern Confederate at Johnson's Island Prison: The Civil War Diaries of James Parks Caldwell*. Edited by George H. Jones. Jefferson: Mcfarland, 2010. 277 pp. \$45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-4471-7.

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## Diary of a Northern Confederate at Johnson's Island

An Ohio-born writer, James Parks Caldwell left us a remarkable set of documents, including his diary of eighteen months in a Union prison on Johnson's Island near Sandusky, Ohio. His father, a Pennsylvanian who graduated from the Ohio Medical College, settled into a prosperous and respectable practice in Hamilton, Ohio. He became president of the county medical association, and happily arranged to have his scholarly son sent to Miami College.

There, young Caldwell and six others founded Sigma Chi in 1855. The editor, George H. Jones, explains in the preface that his interest in James Parks Caldwell grew from his interest in the history of the fraternity. After Caldwell's death in 1912, Sigma Chi received his letters and the small diary, written in cramped pages, from his sister. Much of what we know of Caldwell also comes from Joseph Cookman Nate's *History of the Sigma Chi Fraternity* (1925).

The oddity of finding a Northern-born Confederate among the order's founders enticed Jones as much as it had Nate. After Caldwell graduated in May 1857, he cast about on the edges of the legal profession in Iowa and Ohio. He worked under Judge James Clark of Hamilton, the husband of a Virginia woman. Caldwell, we are told, fell in love with a Southern woman, went to visit her family, and settled in Panola, Mississippi, where he taught the children of local planters and studied law.

The war came and secessionism swept up Caldwell, despite his Northern birth and family ties. The antebellum South relied heavily on Northerners—and foreigners—to perform a variety of services and labors, and secession trapped many behind Confederate lines. Many escaped to the North or quietly awaited the success of Union arms. Among the latter, some found it easiest to enter Confederate military service, particularly after the imposition of conscription in early 1862. One may reasonably suspect that they slipped away even more as-

siduously than most Confederate soldiers. Few actively embraced the Confederate cause as their own, as Caldwell is said to have done. After the war, he went to California as a journalist, then returned to settle in Biloxi and gain admission to the bar.

Anomalies and inconsistencies naturally creep into such stories. Southern political leaders argued for the right of the states to own slaves and described as "tyranny" any consideration by the central government of preventing slaveholders from taking their "property" into the western territories. In 1896, his old friend and roommate Benjamin Piatt Runkle said that Caldwell "believed in legal soundness of the position assumed by the South." However, Runkle claimed that Caldwell "frankly told the people among whom he lived that they underestimated the strength and determination of the Northern people; that the struggle would be a long and terrible one, and that their only hope of success lay in immediate emancipation of the slaves and universal conscription."<sup>[1]</sup> Such a position usually turned Mississippians into Ohioans rather than the other way around, and one suspects that this account reflected the wishful hindsight of 1896 rather than Caldwell's politics in 1860.

The military service records confirm that Caldwell joined and rose through the ranks of Company C of Captain Alfred Hudson's Light Artillery, serving specifically as a sergeant under Lieutenant James L. Hoole in that company. After Shiloh, Caldwell transferred to Watson's Battery of Louisiana Artillery. The Union army captured this unit at Port Hudson in July 1863.

The misadventure left Caldwell confined at Johnson's Island, a mile offshore in Lake Erie, but only two and a half miles from the railroad in Sandusky.<sup>[2]</sup> The government leased fifteen acres on the southeast end of the island, enclosed within a stockade fourteen feet high with a parapet along the outer wall. The plan grouped thirteen two-story barracks along a central street, with one ear-

marked as a hospital and each of the other dozen being able to hold a hundred men. A wood-burning stove was added, with kitchens built as additions. The unexpected rapidity with which the Union armies, particularly that under General U.S. Grant, captured prisoners forced the authorities to bring Johnson's Island online earlier than expected.

Caldwell and his comrades lived miserably there, especially during the harsh winters. Temperatures plunged as low as 22 below zero in December 1863 and January 1864, and they hovered near there for several days. The barracks had no internal walls or insulation, and builders had placed the stairs to the second floor outside. Each room had its own stove, but never seemed to have enough wood, even when supplemented with chairs, and parts of their bunks. Frostbite, disease and death followed, but the freezing of the lake also made escape possible. On New Year's Eve 1863, Colonel John R. Winston and two others escaped over the frozen waters in hopes of reaching Canada, though only Winston actually made it.[3]

Still, the prisoners at Johnson's Island were relatively fortunate. The Federal authorities reserved the base for officers and the numbers confined there peaked at a little over 3,200, although they enjoyed little of the infrastructure necessary for such numbers. The men churned quagmires of mud, and accumulated such a quantity of garbage that they supported a rat population which, in turn, supplemented the rations, which always seemed to fall short of what was needed. Overused latrines also posed a continuing threat to the island's small water supply.

Still, the officers and gentlemen confined there entertained themselves with gambling, a debating society, amateur theatre, and their own Young Men's Christian Association, as well as making little trinkets for sale in town. Caldwell's diary sometimes reads like the work of someone in a circulating library rather than a prisoner of war camp. The camp had enough reading matter that he records having read ten or eleven books monthly by the summer of 1864, when he seemed also to have access to copies of such periodicals as *Blackwell's Magazine* and *Chamber's Repository*, along with a range of newspapers. Caldwell was no common prisoner.

Kenneth Kitchell's nineteen-page essay "Caldwell the Classicist" provides an interesting insight into the intellectual life of the educated young officer. Caldwell had not only studied Latin and, to a far lesser extent, classical Greek, but was employed in Mississippi as a teacher of languages. His reading list includes modern foreign writers but in translation, so his facility in Latin would

have been formidable, at least in the context of a Mississippi plantation.

A former associate dean and professor of history at Louisiana State University, James D. Hardy supplies an introduction that comes to about a fifth of the length of the Caldwell text. Hardy's published work centers on early modern Europe, though it extends to baseball history and criticisms of Immanuel Wallerstein's model of the world systems. Jones explains Hardy's authorship of the introduction simply in terms of his encouragement of the project, but it includes several errors.

Hardy actually understates the peculiarity of Caldwell, a Northerner who fought for the Confederacy. While acknowledging him as an anomaly, Hardy compares him to Andrew Johnson of Tennessee and General George Thomas of Virginia, but these were Southerners who fought for the Union (pp. 4-5). In addition to the black troops, entire regiments of white Southerners opted to fight for the old flag. Caldwell's case is more unusual. In the end, when one speaks of the Seventh Virginia, one ultimately has to clarify whether it was the regiment fighting for the Confederacy or the Union. There was no Seventh Ohio in the Confederate Army. Not even a first. Most Northern participation in the bid for secession reflected the presence of many skilled workers living in Southern communities, who were drawn or ultimately drafted by the Confederacy. However, most accounts of the war tend to minimize that deep, forgotten well of Unionism among the indigenous white population of the slave states.

The preoccupation with the Sigma Chi connection seems also to reflect Jones's own sometimes remarkable disinterest in conveying major points of Civil War history essential to understanding Caldwell's trajectory. It describes his father as "a War Democrat," before quoting a letter from his niece describing him as an ardent sympathizer with the South: "The whole thing we all knew was States Rights and principal and principle" (p. 14). Strangely, the introduction then describes Caldwell's brother-in-law as a "Peace Democrat," which is described in exactly the same way as the previously described "War Democrat." Caldwell himself wrote frankly of his Ohio family, "I am led to believe that they approve of the stand I have taken, explicitly, in some letters, and inferentially in all" (p. 78). Jones also described the views of a Southern sympathizer as those of one who "believed that the states had the right to secede but he was against slavery" (p.16).

However, attitudes on race and slavery are hardly invisible in Caldwell's writings. For him, blacks provided

a major source of comic relief in picking popular songs to translate into Latin. Kitchell's description of this mental exercise as stressing "the nobility of the slave and the affection borne him by his owner" is overgenerous. Caldwell rendered "De Morte Edwardi" from "Old Uncle Ned" of the "nigga" with "no wool on de top ob de head." His "Shew Fly Don't Bother Me" became "Ad Muscam Molestam," replete with references to "Aethiops" and "Nigri" (pp. 61-67). One suspects that, in fact, Caldwell was hardly another white would-be member of the NAACP but for "states' rights."

More substantively, African American soldiers of the First and Third Louisiana Native Guards contributed to the Union victory at Port Hudson that forced Caldwell's surrender. The conduct of Captain Andre Cailloux, killed at the head of his troops shouting orders in French and English, impressed most observers. Caldwell warned his sister in Ohio that "a great part of the published account is absolutely false, about the negroes fighting, for instance" (p. 69). This denial of the reality of black service reflects a not very thinly disguised white supremacism.

Obviously, Caldwell was not unique among educated whites in holding such views. In 1930, Sigma Chi brothers dedicated the James Parks Caldwell Memorial Monument in the Biloxi cemetery, particularly praising his steadfast "fidelity to principle" (<http://history.sigmachi.org/mm/caldwell>). Looking to such models, Sigma Chi itself clung rigidly to its whites-only policy well into the 1960s.

Caldwell's politics were grounded in his elitist faith in the absolute irrelevance of those who were not gentlemen. In his glossary of Latin terms, he defined *proletaire* as "contributing to the support of the state only by raising progeny" (p. 163). As easily as he dismissed the service of black troops at Port Hudson, he seemed to overlook the vast majority of men in his own army, who were actually contributing more than reproducing themselves. When reality inserted itself, it discomfited Caldwell, and he praised the camp guards when they replaced the corporal calling roll in the morning with an officer, because having the former perform the duty was more "impertinent" than leaving the task to "a gentleman" (p. 78).

The views Caldwell articulated provide yet another corrective to the delusion that the Confederacy had anything to do with self-government, even of Southern white men. "All men have a right (not so much to be self-governed, as) to be well-governed," wrote Caldwell. "Universal Suffrage is a humbug." "I would have our government a popular one, but the people should consist of the leading citizens. Populus should not include Plebs. The

multitude is turbulent, the people should be conservative." He opposed the naturalization of immigrants and believed citizenship should be conferred "only by special act of the Legislature." In a properly governed society, the elite would rule without questions or discussions from ordinary citizens. Even caucuses and conventions "have no place in the system of government" (p. 153). He also bemoaned the constitutional restrictions on the acquisition of largely unchecked executive authority: "How I wish that our constitution had provided for some such temporary concentration of power as that granted by the Roman Senatus" (p. 163). In American history, Caldwell and his Confederacy were ahead of their times.

Most interestingly, perhaps, Caldwell came to master the art of ignoring information that did not jibe with his preconceived assumptions. He treated the news of prisoner exchanges after Gettysburg and Port Hudson as "bunk" (p. 75), and described stories of Confederate reversals in Georgia as "a Yankee forgery" (p. 131). When Federal troops garrisoning the prison gave a hundred-gun Union salute to the victory in the Shenandoah valley, he persuaded himself that it must all be "rather premature" (p. 147). In his hands, news of the successes of "U.S. troops"—actually more black soldiers—on Chaffin's Bluff "is not at all credited,—as no such report is apt to be" (p. 149). "The Yankees lie so, there is no believing anything they publish, at the first reading," he wrote, but left no indication in later entries of his reconsideration of such news (p. 146).

Caldwell also noted the passing of the election of 1864. In his mind, the unwashed masses pressing a hopeless war of conquest against a government of gentlemen striving to maintain civilization revealed everything that had gone wrong with the United States. For him, election day, "which doubtless witnesses the suicide of a nation is fitly sad. It is none of our business, though, and really we owe the Yankees no sympathy if they are enslaved in their attempt to conquer us" (p. 158).

Despite its shortcomings and annoyances, *A Northern Confederate at Johnson's Island Prison* provides us another welcome look into the Civil War prisons. Most importantly, I would recommend it for anyone remotely nostalgic about the Lost Cause. Caldwell gives us a particularly unblinking look into the mind of why a Northerner would fight for the Confederacy and, inadvertently, why that cause was lost.

#### Notes

[1]. Runkle's account of Caldwell in *The Sigma Chi Quarterly*, 16 (July 1896): 323-325 (<http://history.sigmachi.org/founders/caldwell>).

- [2]. Lonnie R. Speer, *Portals to Hell: Military Prisons of the Civil War* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1997), 11-12, 77-79, 184-87.
- [3]. Speer, *Portals to Hell*, 139-40, 235-36, 304-05.

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