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Donald A. Clark. *The Notorious "Bull" Nelson: Murdered Civil War General.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011. xvi + 254 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8093-3011-9.

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The Political Martyr

Like a great many Civil War generals, William "Bull" Nelson is most famous for the circumstances of his death. Nelson did not die on the field of battle, but instead was shot and killed on September 29, 1862, by the unfortunately named Union general Jefferson C. Davis. Donald A. Clark's *The Notorious "Bull" Nelson* examines the victim's life in totality, explaining not only Nelson's death, but also the relative lack of controversy that followed. Along the way, Clark provides a wealth of information regarding Nelson's experience with antebellum military and political affairs, as well as his vital role in keeping Kentucky in the Union. Nelson, in Clark's view, is a complex figure: a martyr to political expediency and a victim of his own volatile temperament.

Nelson was born in Maysville, Kentucky, the third child of Dr. Thomas Nelson. The elder Nelson was well connected within the region, serving in the state legislature and on the Board of Trustees of Transylvania University. There, he came into contact with Captain Alden Partridge, whose ideas for a military academy led to the foundation of Norwich University, where young William enrolled in 1837. After finishing at Norwich in 1840, Nelson joined the navy as a midshipman, where, Clark stresses, he faced an undoubtedly rough life. In 1845, Nelson belonged to the first classes to go through the new Naval Academy founded in Annapolis. He served through the Mexican War, including the 1847 siege of Veracruz.

Following the war, Nelson remained with the navy, sailing through the Mediterranean. In the early 1850s, he served on board the USS *Mississippi*, picking up the Hungarian radical Louis Kossuth. Later, Nelson would serve as an escort to Kossuth and his family on a tour of the United States. The young officer also spent time in Chile, furthering America's relationship with that newly democratic South American government. In 1857, Nelson sailed with the USS *Niagara* to Liberia, transporting over three hundred slaves taken from the *Echo*.

Clark's sources in these chapters are sparse, but his use of them demonstrates how to uncover information about less well-known figures in history. Nelson, it appears, wrote little, and Clark constructed his narrative through glancing mentions in newspapers and the letters and journals of other characters. Nelson's presence during the critical transition between the old and new United States navies and his interest in contemporary political unrest in Europe would make him a fascinating study for the various transnational aspects of American politics during the years of growing sectional crisis. Clark hints at these links while discussing Nelson's relationship with Kossuth and the time spent in Chile, but ultimately, the author does not delve much deeper into them as he is more interested in the Civil War. More important for the book's narrative, these years of naval service provided Nelson with strict definitions of duty and obedience, which proved both helpful and troublesome during the Civil War.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Nelson remained with the Union and took part in efforts to ensure that Kentucky did as well. Through prominent Kentuckians, Nelson met with Abraham Lincoln on several occasions, offering valuable service in supporting the Union cause. In Louisville, Nelson played a role in the distribution of government arms to the state's Unionists. As men gathered around the Union banner, Nelson oversaw the development of camps, where his notorious eye for detail earned him the anger and then eventually the grudging respect of volunteer soldiers. In October 1861, Nelson led a force on the Big Sandy Expedition, defeating a rebel force at Ivy Mountain before occupying Piketon. Clark notes that Nelson's superiors, such as Don Carlos Buell, commended the general's successful organization and loyalty while ignoring his volatile temper.

Through the early months of 1862, Nelson aided

Union forces in consolidating their control of Kentucky. Without combat to distract him, Nelson's harsh treatment of his men gained unwelcome attention. Clark cites a number of observers who criticized Nelson as brutish and tyrannical. These concerns died down when Nelson's men moved again, this time to Bowling Green in support of Ulysses S. Grant's assaults on Forts Henry and Donelson in February 1862. Nelson moved further south during March, earning both praise for his soldier's training and disdain for his methods in achieving it.

Clark also discusses Nelson's role in the disastrous beginning to the Battle of Shiloh. The eventual success of Union forces was overshadowed by their early reversals and the battle's infamously high casualties. Nelson blamed Grant and Buell for the army's lack of preparation, and also took credit for the Union stand on the morning of April 2, claiming to have saved the army. Grant noted that Nelson himself had not actually arrived at the battlefield until after the firing had stopped, while William Sherman erroneously believed Nelson to be the source for the infamous report that Union soldiers had been surprised while sleeping in their beds. Clark writes that, on the whole, Grant's view of the situation comes the closest to being accurate, but even his account was "far from accurate" (p. 106). Though no Union officer came out of Shiloh with his reputation intact, Nelson's inability to deal with the press led to stories circulating about his short temper and profane manner, even though some stories occasionally credited him with a great deal of courage.

This courage would be tested in late August, when Nelson's force confronted Kirby Smith at Richmond. An undermanned Union force attempted to hold the region in an attempt to block Smith's advance into Kentucky while simultaneously maintaining communication with Buell, Nelson's superior officer. Staying near a telegraph prevented Nelson from spending enough time with his men, overseeing their training, and making sure subordinate commanders obeyed his orders. With Nelson away from the field, and his subordinate, Mahlon Manson, refusing to attack when commanded, the Federal army faced disaster. The battle was going poorly when Nelson arrived to rally his men. He received a bullet in the leg for his troubles. Clark describes Richmond as "the most conclusive defeat for its size in the Civil War," and attributes Nelson's errors to his strong sense of duty (p. 136). Clark also blames Nelson's defeat on the general's attempt to reconcile his own inclinations with Buell's, an impossible task that invited disaster.

Nelson returned to Louisville for recuperation and to prepare the city's defense. Newspaper correspondents confronted the general with unproven stories of abuse and anger. While the pressure appeared to wear on Nelson, the general doggedly maintained order among the men and continued the occupation of Louisville. As Braxton Bragg advanced closer to Louisville, Nelson aggressively defended the city, restricting the movement of civilians and attempting to override the civilian government in the name of defense. He also clashed with Indiana governor Oliver Morton, a powerful politician with a strong reputation as the soldier's governor. Morton was a close friend of Manson, and blamed Nelson for the disaster at Richmond, attacking the general while defending the honor of Indiana regiments that took part in the fight. It was in Louisville that Nelson dealt with another Indiana officer, Davis, and the old sailor's imperious manner and expectation of unquestioned loyalty sparked a feud between the two. Davis was one of the officers set to command a Home Guard brigade, and Nelson upbraided Davis for their unfit appearance and the latter's seeming lack of authority. Davis took offense at Nelson's gruff manner which he viewed as disrespectful. After a particularly loud confrontation, Davis visited Nelson the next day, hoping to obtain an apology, which Nelson refused. Emboldened by Morton's arrival on the scene, Davis continued badgering the general and the situation escalated into a small physical scuffle. Nelson tried to move away, presumably to arm himself. Davis procured a Tranter pistol and shot his antagonist.

Clark's final chapter discusses Davis's rapid release and the dispiriting lack of closure to the case. He highlights the mixed reaction to Nelson's death, especially the negative reactions from Indianapolis and Cincinnati, as well as additional hedged compliments from some northern newspapers. Though Davis should have been court-martialed, his case was instead handled by Jefferson County court. Clark attributes this move to political expediency. Nelson's heavy-handed leadership in Louisville and brusque manner with the press gave him the appearance of a tyrant. With Confederates still fighting in Kentucky and Lincoln about to put the unpopular Emancipation Proclamation into effect, men like Nelson had few defenders. The court eventually dropped the case against Davis in 1864, ending any chance of prosecution.

Throughout the book, Clark lays out Nelson's fatal flaws, foreshadowing the general's untimely end. As Nelson's fate is hardly unknown (indeed it is contained in the book's title), Clark's writing helpfully serves to reemphasize the point that Nelson was a difficult man with whom to deal. On several occasions, the author suggests oppor-

tunities where a more even-tempered figure might have earned sympathy and justice, even if he could not avoid his fate. Clark faults past narratives for succumbing too easily to contemporary complaints of tyranny and dictatorship. Nelson, like all individuals, was a complex person, and his quick profane temper, though instrumental to his death, should not overshadow the generally effective and always loyal way in which he fulfilled his duty.

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