

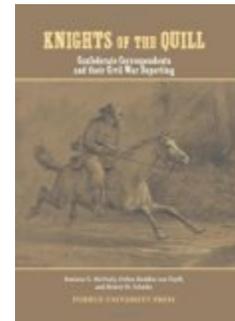


Patricia G. McNeely, Debra Reddin Van Tuyll, Henry H. Schulte, eds. *Knights of the Quill: Confederate Correspondents and their Civil War Reporting*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2010. xiv + 729 pp. \$150.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55753-566-5.

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Knights of the Quill: Confederate Correspondents and their Civil War Reporting

A wide spectrum of men and women served as the journalists who covered the war. Yet Civil War reporters are often stereotyped as rude, crude, and ill-mannered individuals or as “Bohemians” who chased armies, drank hard, and reported gossip and innuendo. *Knights of the Quill* chips away at these generalizations by examining representatives of Southern journalism during the war. Debra Reddin van Tuyll, Patricia G. McNeely, and Henry H. Schulte, with help from several other historians, show us the diverse backgrounds and notable achievements of the Confederate press corps in a series of profiles in this volume from Purdue University Press.

Of the many fascinating reporters in this volume, three exemplify the diversity of journalists. McNeely notes that reporter Felix Gregory de Fontaine was one of the first American journalists to learn shorthand. Born in Connecticut to a French nobleman, he became a correspondent when he was sixteen, and made a name for himself before the war and at its start, not as a reporter for a Southern newspaper, but for first the *Boston Herald* and then the *New York Herald*. His first big story came before the war, when he covered the trial and acquittal of Congressman Daniel E. Sickles and subsequently published a book on the trial. Sickles pleaded insanity on the charge of murdering Philip Barton Key II, the district attorney for Washington, DC, who had conducted an affair with the congressman’s wife.

De Fontaine was on hand at Fort Sumter when the

war began. Most Northern journalists had been sent home by April 1861, but he could stay in Charleston because he was known to have Southern sympathies. By then he had befriended General Pierre G. T. Beauregard, who led the initial Southern triumph. On April 12, 1861, de Fontaine sent a series of telegraphic reports back to New York. A week later, when *Herald* publisher and editor James Gordon Bennett let it be known that he would support the Union in the war, de Fontaine switched to the *Charleston Courier*, which by Southern standards was moderate in its political orientation.

De Fontaine covered the war from start to finish. The Charleston reporter saw the Confederate general Albert Sidney Johnson die on the battlefield at Shiloh. In September 1862 he witnessed the carnage at Antietam, rightly saying that in “length, obstinacy or numbers” the battle near Sharpsburg, Maryland, “outranks them all,” at least to that point (pp. 77-78). The writer saw General Robert E. Lee’s triumph at Chancellorsville, Virginia, in early May 1863, although he missed Gettysburg. He criticized Braxton Bragg for squandering the Confederate victory at Chickamauga in the fall of 1863, and he then tried to maintain high morale with comforting words the following summer when it was becoming clear that William T. Sherman would vanquish Atlanta.

Southern reporters faced inhospitable working conditions in covering the war, and de Fontaine was no exception. These included uncooperative generals, tele-

graph censors, unscrupulous rival journalists, and often harsh camp conditions. The Charleston journalist disproved the stereotype of the bohemian writing from a hotel room. He wrote wherever he could, lying in a tent, leaning against a tree, or sitting on a fence rail. Furthermore, he possessed both a pistol and rifle for protection during battles.

In the final stages of the war, when Sherman had conquered South Carolina, de Fontaine moved to Charlotte and began publishing a newspaper called the *Carolinian*. After the war, he did not give up on journalism. He worked to save some of the Confederate archives, which had been shipped down the railroad lines from Richmond to the Carolinas. Later, he ran several newspapers in Charleston, including a German-language newspaper, *Die Charlestoner Zeitung*. Ultimately, he decided to move his family to New Jersey. He edited the *New York Evening Telegram* before becoming business editor of the *New York Herald*. Later, he later published his war reporting as a magazine.

Another Southern correspondent was “Virginia,” a woman in Norfolk, Virginia, who was a staunch supporter of the Confederacy. Although her exact identity has never been confirmed, she wrote a series of letters about Alabama troops in Norfolk for the *Mobile Advertiser and Register*. As author van Tuyl shows, Virginia wrote about camp conditions, about ordinary city life during the war, and about how women were contributing to the war effort, including making socks for the soldiers. Other letters told about the deaths of soldiers and how nurses were “indefatigable in their labors for those committed to them” (p. 565). Because she was in Norfolk, Virginia also wrote about naval operations. In one case, it is clear she interviewed a witness to a gunboat battle. Much of her work was couched in the ideology of Southern independence. Furthermore, a Virginian producing reports for an Alabama audience showed that the Confederacy was a nation of people who were far removed from one another but kept together by their political affinities. In effect, Virginia’s correspondence was a kind of political journalism that served the war effort.

A third Southern journalist showing the variety of

correspondents is James B. Sener of Fredericksburg, Virginia. The son of a plumber, Sener earned his undergraduate degree from the University of Virginia and his law degree from Washington College. He returned to Fredericksburg and practiced law and journalism. Because many of the eastern front battles occurred in northern Virginia, Sener stayed at home for much of his war reporting. That changed for the Battle of Fredericksburg, as he fled his hometown to avoid the advancing Union Army. Determined to describe the action accurately, Sener returned to within a mile of the city to witness the battle. Six months later, he interviewed the only man who survived the accidental attack by North Carolina soldiers on Stonewall Jackson’s party that resulted in the general’s death. After the war, Sener ran the *Fredericksburg Ledger*.

Tuyl, McNeely, and Schulte provide an appendix that compares fifty Southern correspondents in terms of age, their relative wealth, their education level, their given profession (many were not first and foremost journalists), how many children they had, and whether they owned slaves. Most tended to be professionals—doctors, attorneys, teachers, ministers, or journalists. Only twenty of the fifty journalists owned slaves. Most only owned a few, but Robert W. Gibbes Jr. of the Confederate Press Association owned thirty-nine.

The strength of this book derives from its emphasis on portraying these journalists as ordinary professionals plying their trade during the nation’s darkest political moment. Most Southern journalists at this time worked in smaller newspapers with political orientations. This does not mean that their work was small-minded or trivial. Rather, it came within a particular social and cultural context—which included slavery and states’ rights. Few Southerners or Southern journalists challenged these economic and political institutions. Journalists’ trade, then, included running interference for the political elites of the South and covering their war toward the end of rejecting abolitionism. Yet, along the way, the authors demonstrate that war coverage caused these ordinary professionals to begin to adopt practices and attitudes that would become industry norms.

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