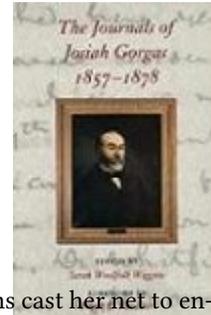


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sarah Woolfolk Wiggins, ed. *The Journals of Josiah Gorgas, 1857-1878*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995. xxxix + 305 pp. \$39.95, ISBN 978-0-8173-0770-7.

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Personal journals, even when skillfully edited, often are rich in research detail but seldom make stimulating reading. Thanks to Sarah Woolfolk Wiggins, emeritus professor of history at the University of Alabama, and the Alabama Press we have at hand a pleasing exception. Appointed to the rank of brigadier general in November 1864, the Confederate chief of ordnance still remains less well known than his eldest son, Major General William Crawford Gorgas, an army surgeon general and a researcher of Yellow Fever. The father was an 1841 West Point graduate, but the son graduated from the University of the South in 1875 after failing to obtain an appointment to his father's alma mater. For Civil War scholars, the eighteen Josiah Gorgas journals provide helpful insights into the activities of the Confederate military establishment. For historians of southern culture, the journals connect the antebellum South to the period of Reconstruction, uninterrupted by the Civil War and focused by the events affecting the Gorgas family over two decades.

Frank Vandiver informs us, in his interesting foreword, of his search for the Gorgas diaries in 1945 and his encounter with two of the elder Gorgas's daughters. Although he published the Civil War portion of the memoirs in 1947, Vandiver credits Wiggins with interpreting the diaries and journals "in full Gorgas family context and in the perspective of the times they cover." Her scholarship, he adds, "informs with the sort of editorial notes expected of a careful scholar, but she enlightens with wide knowledge of American and southern history" (p. xi).

Wiggins's purpose was to add "new dimensions to our understanding of a man usually known only as a military figure" and to provide "an unusual perspective on nineteenth-century southern family life" (p. xxiii). As

Vandiver observed, Professor Wiggins cast her net to encompass more than military biography and successfully crafted the results of that research. In an effort to let Josiah Gorgas "speak for himself to readers through a literal and readable text," the editor has transcribed the journals just as they were written, including idiosyncratic spellings, underlining, and other punctuation. Gorgas explained that his reason for keeping the journals, "however trivial the entries may appear," was as a legacy for his children (p. 88). Editorial notes are included in brackets, and a chronological division of the journals has been imposed. Defaced passages in the original, that reflected Gorgas's "blunt but perceptive assessments" of Confederate officials and family members, have been restored in this edition (pp. xxix, xix).

These manuscript sources have been known to the historical community since the end of the Second World War. What the new edition has done is to place Gorgas in a wider historical context and to give greater detail to his character and activities. The journals begin with an entry for 1 January 1857, but Gorgas's first 38 years were full and interesting. Born in rural Pennsylvania in 1818 in a large family, Josiah had little formal education. He apprenticed in journalism, then read law in the local congressman's office. The congressman nominated young Gorgas to West Point, where he was graduated in 1841. His early commissioned years were spent at Watervliet Arsenal in upstate New York, with brief assignments at other ordnance facilities. During the Mexican War he provided ordnance support to Winfield Scott's army but did not distinguish himself in battle as did many of his contemporaries. In the summer of 1853 he served at the Mount Vernon Arsenal near Mobile, Alabama, where he met Amelia Gayle and married her on December 29 of that year. In July 1856, with their new son William Craw-

ford in tow, the Gorgas family returned to the northeast and duty at Kennebec Arsenal in Augusta, Maine. At this point the journals begin.

The antebellum journals are full of detail illustrating Josiah Gorgas's many interests. For example, we learn of his Jefferson-like attention to diverse matters such as the falling temperatures in Maine in January 1856, the comments of Henry Ward Becher delivered at a lecture in Augusta, the unfolding investigation into the murder of New York dentist Dr. Burdell, his careful following of newspaper reports of the political debates in Washington over the growing sectional tension. This sort of eclectic attention to the social, economic and political life of antebellum America is reminiscent of Theodore Roosevelt's social calendar but seems odd today.

The Civil War journals allow us to peek into the inner workings of the Confederacy and to learn that in the matter of reporting casualties, "The Yankees are probably the greatest liars, but we are not much behind them" (p. 46). Brigadier General Gorgas was no armchair general. He often rode out to the site of recently concluded battles to compare what he had read of the engagement with the terrain (pp. 47-48). Throughout the wartime journals, Gorgas laments the destruction of property by the Yankees. He frequently quotes the rising prices of beef and dairy products.

There are numerous optimistic entries followed several days later with the stark realism and depressing news of the growing military power of the Union forces. Learning of Union successes in Mississippi, Gorgas noted that "Grant appears to have outgeneraled us" and observed that the loss of Mississippi "would have an important influence on the duration of the war" (pp. 67-68). This example of Gorgas's clear analytical ability that surmounts his patriotic optimism makes these journals particularly helpful in understanding the attitudes of Confederate leadership.

Regarding the formerly defaced passages restored in this edition, Wiggins treats us to some of Gorgas's more pointed criticisms of the Confederate high command, starting with President Jefferson Davis himself. "The President seems determined to respect the opinions of no one; and has I fear little appreciation of services rendered, unless the party enjoys his good opinion. He seems to be an indifferent judge of men, & is guided more by prejudice, than by sound, discriminating judgment" (p. 78). Perhaps Gorgas was secure in the knowledge that his evaluations would be protected in his family records, but his willingness to criticize, even parenthetically, the lead-

ers says something important about the makeup of the Confederate bureaucracy and Gorgas's intellectual honesty. There is no indication in the journals that he was as outspoken in public or social conversation.

The events of 1864 seemed to be more promising for the Confederacy, but as Union forces began to close in on Richmond, shortages of food and military supplies strapped the Confederate government. In May, Gorgas recalled with obvious distaste, General Joseph E. "Johnston verifies all our predictions of him. He is falling back just as fast as his legs can carry him" (p. 111). Throughout the war years Gorgas made the effort to read "Yankee Sources" and, by comparing them to Confederate papers, was able to arrive at balanced, although sometimes painful assessments. Lincoln's re-election left little doubt that "the war must go on" until the Northern hope of "our subjugation" is "crushed out and replaced by desire for peace at any cost."

Hope was in short supply as the new year 1865 opened. "Everybody is depressed and somber. Military events have as in '62 & '63 closed against us" (p. 147). Gorgas lamented the efforts of the elderly Jacksonian democrat, Francis Preston Blair, and "so-called [Confederate] peace commissioners," who negotiated unofficially with the enemy at Hampton Roads "before we are half beaten" (pp. 149-150). As the mounting wave of Union military power waxed in the spring of 1865 and Confederate capabilities waned, Gorgas contemplated the evacuation of Richmond and the decision of whether to move his family or leave them behind enemy lines. Public confidence in all but General Lee began to crumble in March. Leaving his family behind amidst the fires in Richmond, General Gorgas entrained for the movement south to Danville and remained there until word of General Lee's surrender on Sunday, 9 April, reached him. The deluge had begun.

The last section of the book deals with the period of Reconstruction. Gorgas noted on 4 May 1865: "The calamity which has fallen upon us in the total destruction of our government is of a character so overwhelming that I am as yet unable to comprehend it." (p. 167) He frequently visited with General William J. Hardee in Dempois and thought about starting an "iron business . . . now that my profession is gone" (p. 183). As he busied himself at his new occupation as part owner and manager of an Alabama iron works, he forgot his routine journal entries. The family was in Baltimore awaiting Gorgas's preparation of their new home in Alabama, which they occupied on 12 April 1866. The iron works progressed

toward profitability slowly, always threatening to fail for lack of funds. President Andrew Johnson's impeachment trial and acquittal were reported by Gorgas, in between reports on the possible resurrection of his business fortunes. In July 1868 the position of president of Sewanee University in Tennessee was offered and accepted, to be effective in March 1869. The peace and satisfaction of academic life seemed to agree with Gorgas and his family. But even that small pleasure was ultimately denied him as the university trustees installed a cleric as vice-chancellor in mid-1878, which caused Gorgas to resign as president. He accepted the presidency of the University of Alabama, thereby taking some of the "sting" out of the Tennessee affair (p. 249).

The last journal entry, transcribed by his daughter Jessie, was for his sixtieth birthday on 1 July 1878. He died on 15 May 1883 in the family home on the campus

of the University of Alabama.

Some of the seven monochromatic maps, although well drawn, are oddly placed in the text. On page 110 the map titled "The Campaign For Atlanta, 1864" is placed in the text where operations in and around Richmond in 1864 are described. There is no map to illustrate those operations. On the other hand, useful maps accompany the discussion of the last days of the Confederate government in North Carolina and Georgia in April and May 1865. This is a very small flaw in an otherwise splendidly conceived and professionally executed set of edited journals.

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