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G. W. Nichols. *A Soldier's Story of His Regiment (61st Georgia) and Incidentally of the Lawton-Gordon-Evans Brigade, Army of Northern Virginia.* Introduction by Keith S. Bohannon. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2011. 224 pp. $22.50, paper, ISBN 978-0-8173-8523-1.

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George W. Nichols (1843-1916) grew up in rural Bulloch County, Georgia. On their 1,600-acre farm the Nichols clan raised livestock and cultivated grain and vegetable crops; interestingly, the Nicholses did not engage in any of the major cash crops--tobacco, indigo, rice, and above all, cotton--that formed the mainstay of the South's economy. At the end of his regimental memoir, *A Soldier's Story of His Regiment (61st Georgia)*, Nichols emphatically reminded his audience, "I, nor my parents never own a slave and have never mistreated one" (p. 215).

Few details emerge as to why Nichols enlisted as a private in September 1861. The 61st Georgia Infantry Regiment, along with five other Georgian regiments, deployed to Virginia in June 1862. The unit saw action with the Army of Northern Virginia in nearly all its major battles and campaigns--Seven Days, Second Manassas, Antietam, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, the Overland Campaign, the siege of Petersburg--and survived, though greatly reduced in number, to surrender at Appomattox in 1865. The brigade, claimed Nichols, "marched about two thousand five hundred miles," fought in "thirty-five hard battles and skirmishes," and "was second to none in the armies of the Confederacy" (pp. 202-203, 37).

Nichols missed out on several of these epic engagements due to illness. Still, Nichols suffered battle wounds on two occasions, one at Maryland Heights in July 1864 and the other at the Third Battle of Winchester during September of that year. While serving in the trenches outside Petersburg in January 1865, he received a furlough to visit his family in Georgia. He never returned to the war; in his memoir Nichols blamed William Tecumseh Sherman's devastation of the Georgian countryside and transportation grid for preventing furloughed soldiers like himself from going back to their units.

Nichols began writing his regimental memoir in 1887 and had it published in the local newspaper. The positive feedback he received encouraged him to revise and enlarge his manuscript, which came out in book form in 1898. *A Soldier's Story* reads not so much as a history of the campaigns and battles of a particular regiment, but rather, as how a surviving veteran chose to remember, record, and commemorate the battle record of his old unit three decades after the end of the Civil War. Keith S. Bohannon, of the University of West Georgia, provides an introduction that hits at the heart of Nichols's memoir; though valuable as a record of a both an individual and a regiment's experience in the eastern theater, the

tone and topic of Nichols's writings suggest a profound desire to celebrate the Lost Cause (p. 7). By emphasizing the heroism, courage, sacrifice, and martial splendor of Southern white men, Nichols helped shift the focus of both professional historical inquiry and public commemoration away from the root causes of the war, the South's "peculiar institution" of slavery, and the war's revolutionary resurfacing of American politics and economy.

Though published over a half-century ago, Bell Irvin Wiley's two books on the lives of Southern and Northern soldiers remain seminal works that helped popularize the social history of warfare as told from the bottom, that is, from the vantage point of the commoners.[1] Nichols would have applauded this development in the historical profession. His memoir, he claims, "gives its readers a faint idea of what officers and private soldiers did" (p. xi). That Nichols found an eager audience for his published memoirs reflects the revolution in military culture that Yuval Harari traces.[2] The cultural perceptions of the common soldier underwent a profound transformation as a result of the successes of the French Revolutionary armies, argues Harari. In an era marked by increasing literacy rates and mass publications, the lowly private, through his own published writings, could shape the public discourse on war. For the first time in human history, says Harari, "common soldiers could compose alternative war narratives of personal experiences--and expect these narratives to be published and read."[3]

Sections of Nichols's memoir stand out as particularly riveting, even to a modern audience. For example, his narrative of the very bloody Overland Campaign of May-June 1865, illustrated clearly the meat-grinder type of warfare that shocked both the North and the South. His vivid portraits of camp life included the profound, the comic, and the tragic: coarse, profane men transformed into devout, morally upright evangelical Christians; an unpopular lieutenant tricked into eating dog meat; two cousins who, in "a dispute about their cooking," killed each other with the same butcher knife (p. 40).

Nichols spent a significant amount of time in the hospital, mostly due to his sickly disposition. His detailed reminisces of life in the hospitals prove quite illuminating. He writes of disease, injuries, and infections, of both good and bad doctors, of clueless male nurses who relied on civilian women to teach them how to care for the wounded. During the Civil War, two soldiers died from disease for every one who died of battlefield wounds. North and South anticipated a brief war; neither side made preparations for extensive casualties, and the medical needs of tens of thousands of sick and injured men often overwhelmed the administrative capacities of both belligerents.

Nichols detested that the war had become so brutal in its later years. "It did not seem right for a great Christian, civilized nation to stoop so low down in heathenism as to burn non-combatant's houses and their contents and turn innocent women and children out with nothing to eat," writes Nichols of the tit-for-tat town burnings practiced by both sides in 1864 (p. 176). Historians Mark Grimsley and Clifford Rogers apply the term "hard war" to the kind of destruction and killings both sides practiced during the conflict.[4] Indeed, the war's revolutionary nature apparently escaped both the younger Nichols and his older self. The North resorted to such tough measures--scorched-earth warfare combined with emancipating and arming the slaves--precisely because the South's fighting prowess and resilience, so lavishly praised by Nichols and other postbellum writers, forced the Union to seek increasingly radical means to crush the rebellion.

The white South paid grievously for its failed bid for independence. A single battle could decimate a regiment; both victory and defeat on the battlefield carried high price tags. Nichols wrote of how Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson rendered John Pope's Union army "completely routed

and demoralized" at the Second Battle of Manassas, and yet he tempers this triumphant retelling with the admission that "over half the men of the Sixty-first Georgia Regiment that were carried into the battle were killed, wounded, or missing" (pp. 50-51). Such long casualty lists explained why the 61st Georgia, which departed for Virginia in 1862 with 1100 members, ended the war with only 161 men on its roster (p. 14).

The older Nichols apparently had no qualms about the killings he did in his youth. "I never took better aim at a bird or squirrel in my life than I took at those Yankee soldiers," he wrote. "And I never enjoyed a party in my young days any better" (p. 134). Such happy reminiscences seem to have coexisted in Nichols's memory alongside grim reflections on what the war did to his young body and spirit. "I have never gotten over it," he admits. "I was a mere boy, and was broken down before I matured into manhood" (pp. 202-203).

Indeed, Nichols's split mindset calls to attention to the heavily contested battleground of public memory, nostalgia, and historical truth. In his introduction Nichols deemed the recent conflict "a lamentable war," and states with pride that in his old days he has seen "the nation as well united as it is." "I would love to see all old soldiers, Union and Confederate, labor to this end," he adds (p. xii). Veterans like himself shared the incommunicable experience of war; Nichols argued that their common sufferings and selfless heroics should soothe over past disputes, lay to rest any lingering enmity between Northerners and Southerners, and form the basis for a united country.

At the end of his narration, Nichols reflected, "I know that if the Northern and Southern people would have known what the consequences would be, there would have been no war.... The negroes are all free and whole nation is satisfied that such is the case." "[W]e old soldiers," he added without a hint of irony, "our sympathies are always great for people in bondage" (pp. 215-216). ***A Soldier's Story*** has additional texts besides Nichols's written manuscript: an 1885 lecture by retired Union colonel Theodore Dodge on the Battle of Chancellorsville, a roster of Companies of the 61st Georgia, and three poems titled "The Swords of Grant and Lee," "Two Brothers: One in Blue, One in Gray," and "A Galaxy of Southern Heroes." Also included are the farewell addresses of Confederate generals Lee and John B. Gordon, who both urged their men to become good, peaceful citizens of a united United States. In ways subtle and not so subtle, this motley collection constitutes a view of the Civil War as a preventable tragedy, redeemed only by the courage, the noble self-sacrifice, and the fighting prowess of those soldiers whom the aged Nichols proudly claimed as comrades-in-arms.

Such attempts to bring former enemies together relied heavily on copious amounts of sheer myth-making and the whitewashing of history. The book lacks any acknowledgment of slavery as the fundamental cause of the war or the need to adapt to a postwar world in which slavery was abolished and African Americans were nominally full citizens and members of American society. Despite the passage of Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, ex-slaves lost nearly all the gains made possible by the effusive shedding of blood by Northern soldiers, both black and white. Nichols's rewriting of recent history helped made Jim Crow possible in the postbellum decades. Racial equality, and even mention of the Civil War's root causes or the South's determination to uphold human bondage, fell by the wayside in the name of national reconciliation. Even as white veterans like Nichols came together to celebrate and commemorate their shared experience of war and their one undivided country, black Americans continued to remain, if not slaves, then second-class citizens living under a system of repression and terror.

Notes

[1]. Bell I. Wiley's *The Life of Johnny Reb* and *The Life of Billy Yank*, both published by Bobbs-Merrill, first came out in 1943 and 1952, respectively.

[2]. Yuval Noah Harari, *The Ultimate Experience: Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture, 1450-2000* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

[3]. Harari, *The Ultimate Experience*, 144.

[4]. See Mark Grimsley and Clifford Rogers' edited volume, *Civilians in the Path of War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).

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