

David Seed, Stephen C. Kenny, Chris Williams, eds.. *Life and Limb: Perspectives on the American Civil War*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015. Illustrations. 240 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-78138-250-9.

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Walt Whitman (1819-92) once famously suggested that the “real” story of the Civil War “would never get in the books.”[1] Yet, as demonstrated by the new edited volume *Life and Limb: Perspectives on the American Civil War*, the war inspired no shortage of contemplative writing that attempted to tell that “real” story. This new volume, edited by David Seed, Stephen C. Kenny, and Chris Williams, all of the University of Liverpool, offers a curated collection of some of these writings, resulting in a short and accessible primary source reader on the medical history of the American Civil War.

Life and Limb offers seven thematic sections, each consisting of excerpts of primary sources that are occasionally accompanied by a short scholarly essay. The sections each focus on a different aspect of the medical history of the war. The first section is “Medical and Surgical Memoirs,” followed by sections titled “Accounts of Nursing,” “Medical Facilities and Pathology,” and “Amputations and Prosthetic Limbs”; there is a section called “In the Field of Battle,” and the volume concludes with “Post-War Narratives.” The primary materials included represent some of the most powerful and important sources available to historians: selections from Walt Whitman’s *Specimen Days* (1882) and numerous other nurses’ di-

aries and memoirs, S. Weir Mitchell’s writings on phantom limb, even Robert Bartholomew’s thoughts on nostalgia. Many of the excerpts are exceedingly short—Mary Chestnut’s description of Confederate hospitals, for example, is only two paragraphs long. Others, like Mitchell’s short story *The Case of George Dedlow* (1866), are republished in full.

Although the primary sources are important, there are problems with the choice of source material. For example, the excerpts are almost entirely from Northern and Union perspectives, only two of the sources coming from a Confederate or Southern perspective, these totaling about four paragraphs. Just two sources, by nurse Susie King Taylor and Union soldier Christian Fleetwood, offer a black point of view, while one other describes black soldiers from the perspective of a white officer, Thomas Wentworth Higginson. The sources are not always well contextualized, or even fully cited, for the reader. For example, Chestnut’s description of Confederate hospitals is offered with no indication where those hospitals were located (Richmond), let alone explanation of medical care in the Confederate army or home front. One particularly striking photograph of a disembodied arm in a bucket is captioned only as “an amputated arm,” with no citation to its source

or the collection from whence it came, entirely thwarting an interested party looking to learn more (p. 146).

The book includes a few short and well-written essays that appear in some of the sections of primary sources. Robert Leigh Davis's essay on Whitman's *Specimen Days* is a lovely read but is a literary analysis rather than a historical work, with no footnotes and only one work of history mentioned in the citations. Dillon Jackson Carroll's essay on the life of Union amputee Napoleon Perkins is well written and interesting but is so short that it leaves the reader wanting more. Mick Gidley's essay on Civil War photography is longer, with useful insights into the medical photographs of the Army Medical Museum, but without delving very deeply into the issues surrounding the capture and display of images of disabled bodies. The introductory essay recounts the materials included in the volume but does not attempt to situate them within existing scholarship, while the concluding essay offers a very brief overview of the field. Overall, the essays are interesting but do little to advance the scholarly conversation about health, medicine, and disability during and after the Civil War.

This raises my main critique of the book: what exactly is its purpose? How the editors envision the book fitting into the scholarship on Civil War medicine appears nowhere in the volume. Is it designed to be used in the classroom, as a primary document reader? Or is the intended audience casual interested members of the public? A clear statement of purpose might have helped readers understand the intentions of the authors in their choice of source material and arrangement of the essays. The intention behind the essays is equally baffling; they do not necessarily grapple with their surrounding sources, nor do they always attempt to contextualize or make sense of the primary documents. Finally, for a book that features fifteen photographs of disabled men, as well as a crutch-using amputee on its cov-

er, it does very little to contend with disability outside of Carroll's all-too-brief essay.

Life and Limb is a concise and readable book that will likely be well received by casual readers, and may work as a documentary text in a college seminar on the subject. However, it will likely frustrate scholars looking for deep analysis or fresh perspectives. While the book includes powerful sources and good writing, it falls short of becoming the much-needed reader on Civil War health, medicine, and disability.

Note

[1]. Walt Whitman, "The Real War Will Never Get in the Books," in *Prose Works* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1892), p. 51.

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