

Evan A. Kutzler. *Living by Inches: The Smells, Sounds, Tastes, and Feeling of Captivity in Civil War Prisons.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019. 208 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4696-5378-5.



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When Walt Whitman lamented that the real war would never get in the books, was he considering the smell of war, its sounds, tastes, and touch? Evan A. Kutzler has helped to remedy that in his new book, *Living by Inches: The Smells, Sounds, Tastes, and Feelings of Captivity in Civil War Prisons*. Kutzler builds on the work of Mark M. Smith, his mentor at the University of South Carolina and pioneer in sensory history methodology, and narrows his focus to those soldiers who spent time as prisoners of war, a topic which gives him a great deal with which to work.[1] Rather than enjoining the debate concerning intentional mistreatment and deaths in the prisons, Kutzler analyzes how the prisoners experienced confinement through their senses. Relying heavily on diaries kept by prisoners and letters they wrote, Kutzler establishes that the authors of these sources “explained their conditions most clearly in patterns of sounds, smells, tastes, and feelings.” Often they described the disabling and decivilizing effect of imprisonment through descriptions of numerous assaults on their senses while in confinement. In this

way, the writings left by prisoners depicted “the inch-by-inch enervation of daily life” they constantly felt; thus the title *Living by Inches* (p. 3). Kutzler’s narrative also shows how the prisoners physically and psychologically adapted to the conditions that caused their discomforts. What he provides is an empathetic analysis of life, and death, in prisoner-of-war camps.

Kutzler sets the stage for the rest of his book by discussing the impact of nightfall on the prisoners. During daylight hours, our sense of sight usually provides us with most of the information we gather; nightfall proved to be leveler for the other senses. “While night blinded the eyes,” Kutzler explains, “the nonvisual senses from feeling to smelling were most acute in the hours of darkness” (p. 20). This heightening of the senses could bring warnings of the dangers and reminders of the discomforts of confinement. It could also bring sleep, with dreams that could be both disturbing and soothing, although whatever comfort prisoners received from dreams proved fleeting.

In the prisons, human waste, rotten food, unwashed bodies and clothes, and the unburied dead created an olfactory olio of unpleasant odors. The sense of smell could provide warnings of unsanitary conditions and disease. In those rare moments when prisoners could breathe fresh air, the smell provided them with a brief taste of freedom. Usually, foul odors remained constant, and their pervasiveness “symbolized the disabling and dehumanizing process of captivity” (p. 60).

Even more suggestive of the uncivilizing nature of imprisonment was lice infestation. To many mid-nineteenth-century Americans, lice represented a trait associated with poverty, impurity, and inferiority. Proper, and properly washed, people did not get lice. Nevertheless, as Kutzler explains, “The Civil War was great boon for lice” (p. 63). Prisoners had to learn not only how to cope with lice but also how to remain in constant battle against them. Indeed, this war against vermin for many became a new symbol of the civilized man in the prisons. Some soldiers even learned how to joke as a defense mechanism against the pests.

Noise in the camps was inescapable for those confined and their guards alike. Sound had meaning. It could entertain or express patriotism in the form of music. It could give warning of danger in the form of gun shots from the guards. Sounds that were out of place, especially at night, could also alert guards to potential trouble. Sound in the form of rumors could bring information to the prisoners, sometimes true, sometimes not. And the sounds of nature, such as the noise made by birds, could remind prisoners of freedom.

Although circumstances differed for prisoners, as some had more and better access to food than others, hunger forced prisoners to make choices about what they would eat in order to improve their conditions and in some cases to survive. “Hunger affected what prisoners considered palatable,” Kutzler asserts, “by blunting the smells, tastes, and texture of prison food” (p. 116). Rotten, worm-infested food proved commonplace. Occa-

sionally, prisoners supplemented their diet with an unfortunate stray dog or cat, although some refused to eat an animal they associated with pets. Rat also found its way on the menu. Southern prisoners were more likely to eat rat. Northern prisoners were more likely to complain about the indigestibility of corn meal, something commonly found in Southerners’ diet. Early in the conflict, prisoners could enhance their diet with food sent to them by family and friends or purchased in internal prison markets, but as the war progressed such options diminished.

Despite his best efforts, Kutzler could not avoid the issue of which side’s prisons were worse, at least indirectly. As the camps became more crowded during the last two years of the war due to the breakdown of the Dix-Hill Cartel, conditions worsened, but the Confederate government proved more limited in its response as the South’s resources diminished rapidly. Still, Kutzler’s analysis of the sensory experience of imprisonment has enhanced our understanding of life for those soldiers and civilians (Kutzler does include a few civilians in his narrative) unfortunate enough to have spent time in military confinement during the Civil War.

Note

[1]. Mark M. Smith, *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), and *The Smell of Battle, the Taste of Siege: A Sensory History of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

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