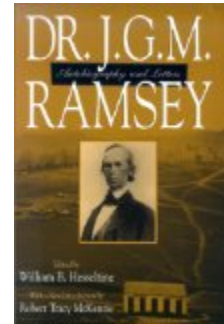


H-Net Reviews

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J. G. M. Ramsey. *Dr. J. G. M. Ramsey: Autobiography and Letters*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002. xxxviii + 367 pp. \$26.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57233-173-0.

Reviewed by Erik Loomis (Department of History, University of New Mexico)
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Divided Appalachia

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Over the past fifteen years, historians have paid increasing attention to the Civil War homefront. The works of Stephen V. Ash, Martin Crawford, and John C. Inscoe and Gordon B. McKinney, among others, have vastly increased our knowledge of the lives of non-combatants during the great conflict.[1] Many of these recent histories focus on contested communities during the war, particularly in the Appalachian upcountry. These books examine how the Civil War affected individual communities and the consequences of the war for the lives of everyday citizens. The republication of *Dr. J. G. M. Ramsey: Autobiography and Letters* provides a worthy addition to the literature of the Civil War homefront.

J. G. M. Ramsey is perhaps best known today as an early historian of Tennessee. He founded the East Tennessee Historical Society in 1834 and served as president of the Tennessee Historical Society from 1874 until his death in 1884. However, Ramsey's autobiography tells us far more about the Civil War than early Tennessee history. Ramsey wrote little on the early years of the war when the Confederates controlled Knoxville. Rather, he focused on the Union occupation of Knoxville beginning in 1863. In particular, Ramsey viewed Union rule as tyrannical and sought to expose the crimes of the Union army against himself and the people of East Tennessee. Ramsey's autobiography recounts the tragedies that befell him and his family during the Civil War. Like so many families, he lost a son in battle. He suffered other personal tragedies as well, including the death of two

daughters during the war, the burning of his home in Knoxville, the dispersion of his family to various parts of the South during the war, and a long exile from Knoxville that did not end until 1872. Ramsey's autobiography shows with strong emotion the deep divisions that split East Tennessee during the Civil War.

While Ramsey's Civil War experience dominates the autobiography, the letters included in the book are enlightening on other aspects of nineteenth-century Tennessee as well, including early industrialization and the emergence of railroads in the South. Particularly interesting is Ramsey's defense of slavery. Complicating the popular belief that Appalachia was a pro-union and anti-slavery stronghold, Ramsey vigorously defended slavery, claiming that blacks were happy in bondage and that the institution demonstrated the South's superiority to the North. In fact, Ramsey believed that southern society could only exist with the use of African labor.

This new edition of Ramsey's autobiography comes with a foreword by Durwood Dunn and a fine introduction by Robert Tracy McKenzie. The introduction particularly adds a great deal to the book, detailing Ramsey's life and placing his autobiography in a larger historical and historiographical context. McKenzie's introduction serves as a good opening to the book and helps give readers a better understanding of Ramsey's life and world.

Less useful to the readability of the book, and its relevance to the larger issues of Ramsey's day, is the correspondence between Ramsey and Wisconsin historian Lyman Draper. These letters concern the early history

of East Tennessee, one of the great passions of Ramsey's life. In fact, Ramsey wrote a history of the early days of Tennessee, but this was lost in the fire that consumed his home during the Union occupation of Knoxville. The way that the original editor of the book, William B. Hesseltine, integrated the letters into the larger text of the book is quite interesting, but the letters to Draper simply do not hold the reader's interest. While those studying the early period of white settlement in Tennessee may find this correspondence interesting, these letters add little to Ramsey's narrative or our understanding of the period in which he lived. Overall, however, the republication of Ramsey's autobiography is a significant addition to the

historiography of the Civil War homefront and deserves a wide reading.

Note

[1]. Stephen V. Ash, *Middle Tennessee Society Transformed, 1860-1870: War and Peace in the Upper South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1988); Martin Crawford, *Ashe County's Civil War: Community and Society in the Appalachian South* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001); and John C. Inscoe and Gordon B. McKinney, *The Heart of Confederate Appalachia: Western North Carolina in the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

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