

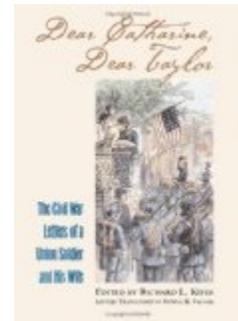
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard L. Kiper, ed. *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor: The Civil War Letters of a Union Soldier and His Wife*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002. x + 464 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1205-5.

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The Days of Their Lives

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During the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln once witnessed a conference in which a surgeon described a new technique that he had used on a wounded Union soldier. After the presentation, other surgeons began asking questions about the procedure. This went on for an extended period of time until Lincoln asked what he thought was the only really important question, inquiring “what happened to the soldier?”

This illustrates an important point regarding the literature on the Civil War. While some readers want to peruse books that concentrate on the purely military aspects of the conflict, many others would rather know more about the individuals who played a part in that war. Readers who fall into this latter category will be especially pleased with *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor: The Civil War Letters of a Union Soldier and His Wife*. Masterfully edited by Richard L. Kiper, this book tells the story of a husband and wife separated by battle but united by a deep and abiding love.

While thousands of Iowans answered Lincoln’s call for volunteers in the first year of the Civil War, Taylor Peirce had chosen to remain at home with his children. When Lincoln made his second request for troops in the summer of 1862, however, the forty-year-old decided to join the cause. Before leaving, he moved his family in with his sister and her husband in Des Moines. He then journeyed to Camp Pope near Iowa City, where his

regiment (the 22nd Iowa) received training. During his nearly three years of federal service, Taylor wrote regularly to his extended family back in Iowa, and Kiper has included one hundred two of these letters in his book. Remarkably, Taylor Peirce managed to save fifty-one complete letters from his wife, seventeen from his daughter Sallie, and eight from his sister and her husband. These, too, are included in the book. Kiper has to a great extent kept the correspondence exactly as it was written, correcting the spelling and inserting punctuation marks and capital letters only when absolutely necessary. The result is an eminently readable product that does total justice to the individuals who left us this glimpse into the past.

No matter how well it is written, however, a book of this sort succeeds or fails on what the people actually had to say. Without question, *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor* is as interesting a read as it is a well written one. First, Taylor and Catharine Peirce come across as individuals keenly aware of what is being asked of them during the nation’s crisis. It is clear from Taylor’s letters that he would prefer to be back in Iowa with his wife and children, but felt compelled to “be one of the many that God has raised to put down this rebellion” (p. 28). Obviously, this letter indicates that he had enlisted to restore the Union, but in the same letter he also reminds his wife that he had joined to “blot out the institution of slavery” (p. 28). Interestingly, these comments come from a letter dated September 13, 1862—nine days before Lincoln’s Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. Taylor, then, is

one of the minority of Union soldiers who enlisted in 1862 with the belief that slavery was an abomination.

Catharine's letters are filled with comments that resonate with the sentiments voiced by Taylor. She speaks of how glad she will be when Taylor returns, but knows that he is engaged in a righteous effort. She, too, believes that slavery is repugnant, telling him on Christmas Day of 1864 how glad she is that the Union has "the coil of freedom around the great beast of Slavery" (p. 326). She also provides interesting commentary regarding her perspective on the war itself. Often Catharine apologizes for the poor literary quality of her letters, telling her husband how difficult it is to concentrate with three children to take care of. On November 6, 1863, for instance, she tells Taylor that she has just sat "down to write thee today just to let thee know we all are. Not that I have any news for I have not seen or heard anything this week but the baby and him crying. For the children all have had such bad colds and are so trouble some that I have not done much but attend to them" (p. 151). When she did have time, however, Catharine demonstrated a keen sense of the events transpiring around her. On March 15, 1864, she told her husband that the draft might be instituted in Iowa, and says that she hopes the authorities will identify Copperheads "and find where they are so that some of them will have to husel out or pay out their green backs which will hurt them almost as bad as to go. For most cowards love money better than any thing" (p. 186). Without question, Catharine's correspondence does provide a fascinating glimpse of life on the home front during the Civil War.

Those readers more interested in the war itself will not be disappointed with this work, as Taylor did not shy away from talking to his family about his combat experiences. The 22nd Iowa, perhaps not as famous as some of the other regiments from the Hawkeye State, still compiled an impressive record during the course of the Civil War. Taylor's letters do an excellent job of conveying the essence of his regiment's military exploits. I was particularly impressed with his accounts of combat written during the Vicksburg campaign; trying to describe for his wife the heroism an officer displayed, on May 4, 1863, Taylor said "we could hear him giving his commands with a loud clear voice and urging his men to give it to them while he sat or moved round amongst the guns on his horse amid a perfect shower of grape canister and shell as though it was but a May shower of rain instead of a shower of iron" (p. 107). Speaking of the siege of Vicksburg, on June 7, 1863, Taylor tells his wife that he is "laying within 400 yards of the reble forts and close

to our batteries that fire a shot every 5 minutes ... and the muskets are all the time firing and sounds for all the world like a woodchopping" (pp. 113-114). Also of great interest is the fact that the 22nd Iowa was one of the few regiments from that state to see action in Virginia as part of Sheridan's Shenandoah Valley campaign. While serving in that theater of operations, Taylor received his only wound of the war. Interestingly, he makes no mention of that fact to his wife, presumably hoping to keep her from worrying about his safety.

If Richard Kiper had done nothing else than put the letters of Taylor and Catharine Peirce into print, he would still deserve the approbation of all those interested in learning more about the human element in the Civil War. He has, however, done far more than simply put their correspondence into book form. He has familiarized himself with the writings of numerous historians on subjects as varied as the motivation of Union soldiers and the literary tendencies of husbands and wives during the nineteenth century. His efforts have allowed him to place the story of the Peirces solidly within the context of their milieu. He has also provided a wealth of footnotes that allow the reader to know who many of the individuals appearing in the letters are; these footnotes also provide information which will give the reader a better understanding of the events being discussed in the correspondence. Finally, Kiper has provided helpful maps and interesting illustrations.

While Kiper has done a truly exceptional job of editing *Dear Catharine, Dear Taylor*, there are errors that managed to escape detection before the book was printed. A few dates found in Kiper's footnotes are incorrect: the *Trent* incident happened in 1861 rather than 1862, for example, and William Stone could not have ordered troops to guard Iowa's borders in 1862 because he was not elected governor of Iowa until 1863. In addition, as is related in my book *A Damned Iowa Greyhound*, it was the 19th Iowa, rather than the 4th Iowa as Kiper states, that had two hundred ten men taken prisoner at the Battle of Stirling's Plantation. As a final example, I am sure that the good people of Corydon in Iowa's Wayne County will no doubt be chagrined to see the name of their city misspelled twice in Kiper's notes, and in two different ways.

These errors, however, are insignificant when compared to the overall quality of this work. All of us interested in gaining a deeper understanding and appreciation of the men and women caught up in the maelstrom that was the American Civil War should applaud the efforts of

Richard Kiper to bring the story of Taylor and Catharine War can prove as worthy as his.
Peirce to light. I only hope that my work on the Civil

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