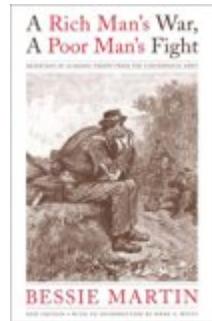


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Bessie Martin. *A Rich Man's War, A Poor Man's Fight: Desertion of Alabama Troops from the Confederate Army*. Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 2003. xiv + 281 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8173-5010-9.

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For all the ink that has been spilled over the Civil War, historians have not given their sustained attention to deserters.[1] The University of Alabama Press has recently republished one of the few monographs on the subject, Bessie Martin's *Desertion of Alabama Troops from the Confederate Army* (1932), although the original title has been demoted to subtitle status in this reprinting. Historians can still profit from reading this book, which despite its age fits snugly into contemporary historiographical debates about why men fought—or did not fight—in the Civil War.

The introduction by Mark Weitz outlines Martin's thesis and presents the fragmentary information that is available on Martin's life. That we do not know much about Martin is an unfortunate loss, because she is one of several women who explored the less heroic aspects of the Confederacy and antebellum South at a time when women were struggling in a male-dominated profession.[2] Weitz notes that Martin's topic was unusual, given that Civil War veterans were generally revered at the time she was writing. Perhaps as evidence that Martin was aware of how her topic might rankle some, names of deserters are replaced with dashed lines when primary sources are quoted in the book (for example, pp. 61, 127, and 221).

The thesis is stated by Martin herself with refreshing directness on the first page of the preface. "Desertion of Alabama troops in the Civil War was a manifestation of sectionalism in the state, due largely to the prevalence of poverty" (p. 7). Martin sets out to prove this thesis in eight chapters. The first chapter tackles the definition of desertion. Here, she is fully aware of perhaps one of the most difficult problems in the study of desertion: un-

derstanding the intent of the deserter. Did men leave because they had no use for the goals of the Confederacy, or were they only temporarily dissatisfied and willing to return later? Martin notes that the historical record does not make the task much easier for the historian, for there was "no uniformity of practice by officers in determining the length of time which should elapse before absence without leave should be marked desertion" (p. 18). Martin argues that the fuzzy definition of desertion during the war made it difficult to prevent its occurrence. In the end, she takes a broad view and addresses both desertion to the Union and deserters who later returned or merely went home. Martin's second chapter outlines the distribution of deserters, a project that still awaits adequate scholarly treatment in the majority of Southern and Northern states. Martin establishes several important parts of her argument here. First, although desertion mainly occurred in three "waves," it happened continually during the war (p. 26). Second, she traces the homes of most deserters to the regions of Alabama north and southeast of the "black belt" (pp. 42-43). From this, she concludes that deserters were generally the poorer Alabamians.

The third chapter addresses political and military causes for desertion: refusal to serve if a certain man was not elected captain; the inability of the army to feed, clothe, or pay its troops; "twenty-negro" laws which allowed wealthier Alabamians to avoid service; and the infiltration of the Peace Society into the army. The fourth chapter addresses her more substantial concern: the social and economic causes that led men to desert. Here, Martin turns her eye to the homefront, illustrating the extent of poverty and the difficulties in providing relief. For Martin, homefront distress that was communicated

to soldiers “caused loss of fighting sprit among the soldiers” (p. 144). Efforts to provide homefront relief, the subject of the fifth chapter, may seem out of place in a book on desertion; but because Martin considered desertion to be result of privations on the homefront, the topic is central to her concern. She concludes that spiraling inflation and the ever-increasing numbers of indigent made it impossible for Alabama authorities to fully address the problem. The next chapters outline the military’s effort to stem desertion and the fates of men who deserted to the Union. Finally, Martin concludes the book by assessing desertion’s impact on the war effort.

As Weitz points out, Martin’s work represents an advance over Ella Lonn’s *Desertion during the Civil War* (1928) because Martin is far less reliant on the *The War of the Rebellion (OR)* collection of printed documents.[3] While there are plenty of references to the *OR* in Martin’s footnotes, her bibliography shows that she went far beyond that collection when writing the work. Her investigation of the homefront is strengthened by her use of Alabama’s public records and newspapers. Using such sources allows her to make an argument for internal discord in the Confederacy. The original subtitle to her book—“A Study in Sectionalism”—shows that she posited strong sectional divisions in the state that ultimately weakened Alabama’s ability to contribute to the war effort.

Historians of the Civil War will easily be able to place Martin’s work into contemporary historiographical debates. She stands closer to David Williams than to Gary Gallagher in arguing that homefront problems led to loss of will on the battlefield. She also implicitly challenges the work of James McPherson by paying little attention to ideological reasons for fighting and looking instead at those soldiers who chose to leave battle. And she presents an early argument for internal division within the South as a characteristic which led to its defeat.[4] Some of the book’s methodological problems (discussed below) make it unlikely that people who are strongly attached to opposite positions will be convinced by Martin’s writing, but she has nonetheless made it difficult to dismiss the extent of poverty and dissatisfaction with the Confederate cause.

Naturally, some of the interpretive techniques that historians use have evolved since this book was written, while modern-day readers may find some gaps frustrating. Martin pays a great deal of attention to the economic disparities among Alabamians, but says little about any strains on the racial bonds that linked

whites. There are some tantalizing hints in the book, for example, the headline for a newspaper advertisement that listed the names of deserters screamed “Brand them Deep, Dye them Black” (p. 30); deserters were hunted with dogs “such as were used for hunting runaway negroes” (p. 221); and volunteer soldiers chafed at having to carry passes “which reminded them of slaves’ passes” (p. 65). But these pass without comment. Historians today would no doubt also like to see more direct testimony from the soldiers and families themselves, particularly given Martin’s stress on social and economic causes for desertion. In this book, these people speak largely when they write to their elected officials. Finally, Martin’s statistical work is hampered by her assumption that men from a county will necessarily have the “average” economic characteristics of that county. She does not look at individual backgrounds, nor does she distinguish much between large and small slaveholders. And her assumptions about deserters and economic background are never tested against a sample of non-deserters.

Of course, Martin can hardly be blamed for writing the book in 1932. And she is well aware of the limitations of her sources. But she also presents a strong case for internal discord in Alabama, and her book deserves to be read by historians today. By closely examining the circumstances surrounding desertion in Alabama, as Weitz notes in the introduction, Martin has truly blazed a path for historians—even if we have been tardy in locating it.

Notes

[1]. While there is a growing article literature on Confederate desertion, I am aware of only three monographs on desertion: the book presently under review; Ella Lonn’s *Desertion during the Civil War* (New York: Century, 1928; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998); and Mark A. Weitz’s *A Higher Duty: Desertion among Georgia Troops during the Civil War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000).

[2]. To Martin I would add Ella Lonn; Mary Elizabeth Massey, who wrote on homefront shortages; and Marjorie Stratford Mendenhall, who published an article on antebellum southern tenancy. Martin, Lonn, and Mendenhall all published their work before World War II. Mendenhall is treated in Anne Firor Scott’s *Unheard Voices* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993).

[3]. United States, War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. 128 v., (Washington, D.C.:

Government Printing Office, 1880-1901).

[4]. David Williams, *Rich Man's War: Class, Caste, and Confederate Defeat in the Lower Chattahoochee Valley* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998); Gary W. Gallagher, *The Confederate War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); and William W. Freehling, *The South vs. the South: How Anti-Confederate Southerners Shaped the Course of the Civil*

War (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

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