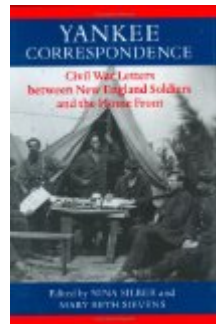


Nina Silber, Mary Beth Sievens, eds. *Yankee Correspondence: Civil War Letters between New England Soldiers and the Home Front*. Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1996. x + 169 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-1668-2.

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## Civil War Letters of New England Soldiers and Families

One of the most valuable tools historians have at their disposal in studying the sociological impact of the Civil War is the enormous number of letters written by the soldiers and their families. Nina Silber, in her lengthy and fascinating introduction to this book, states that the Civil War “unleashed a veritable onslaught on the U.S. postal system.” Roughly 90,000 letters passed through the postal system in Washington, D.C., daily, going to or from Union troops in the East. The same volume is estimated to have been routed daily to or from Union troops in the West. The Confederacy also contributed large amounts of mail every day, often through war-ravaged cities and towns. This freshet of mail contributed greatly to the odds of so many letters surviving the war.

This slim book is dedicated to filling a gap in the history of specific Civil War participants and their families—the stories of New England soldiers. The astute research and editing of Silber and Sievens give us a collection of letters, most of which never had been published, that sheds a solid light on the intimate thoughts of the letter writers, be they soldiers, wives, parents, business partners, or friends. The book is divided into six chapters with letters grouped together by a general theme. Some letter writers have a letter or letters in more than one chapter. That device is good for those who want more than a glimpse of one individual, but can also cause the reader to go back and forth between chapters to keep track of that person.

Chapters range from the soldiers’ military experience

with descriptions of specific campaigns, to soldiers and their families trying to make meaning of the war, including debating the cause(s). One chapter, devoted to how these men interpreted the South they saw around them, shows many soldiers with as much or more prejudice against slaves as against slavery. Another chapter is composed of letters about the effect of the war on the home front. These letters often convey the strongest emotions: anger directed at the government because their pay allotments are not received by families; disgust at the use of bounties to increase the enlistment numbers of young men; despair at the deaths of loved ones; and determination to make it home to see children grow up. A final chapter presents an extended exchange of letters within one Vermont family and gives a good look at changing New England lives.

Silber and Sievens have succeeded in their goal to bridge the historical gap by bringing back to life the men and women of New England who fought in and lived through the Civil War. Historians will waste no time in making *Yankee Correspondence* a significant addition to their reference libraries.

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