H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

W. C. Corsan. *Two Months in the Confederate States: An Englishman's Travels Through the South.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996. xxii + 155 pp. $26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2037-8.

Reviewed by James Marten (Department of History, Marquette University)
Published on H-CivWar (March, 1997)

If nothing else, nineteenth-century Englishmen demonstrated a marked ability to keep their upper lips stiff in the face of physical discomforts entirely foreign to their cool, green island. When W. C. Corsan, a Sheffield hardware merchant, traveled through the Confederacy in the fall of 1862, he endured steamy humidity and bitter cold, fought off swarms of mosquitoes, shared flee-ridden beds with perfect strangers, squeezed into crowded, dirty, and agonizingly slow-moving passenger trains, and found liquor a rare and expensive commodity. Yet he managed to return, dignity intact, to England, where in 1863 he anonymously published the brief travelogue that Benjamin Trask has painstakingly edited.

Trask suggests that Corsan and his publisher were trying to make a quick dollar or two with the book. It has been obscured ever since by more famous books like William Howard Russell's *My Diary North and South* and Arthur Fremantle's *Three Months in the Southern States*. Corsan traveled in less lofty circles than his countrymen. Although he ostensibly came to America to check on his firm's southern clients, he never mentioned business meetings. Rather, he offered his perceptions and opinions of the Confederate cause as traveled from occupied New Orleans to Richmond and into the North. He crossed Union lines twice–once with a pass, once (in northern Virginia) without–visited Mobile, Montgomery, Atlanta, and Charleston, and spoke to southerners from many walks of life. He accompanied refugees out of New Orleans in a leaky Lake Ponchartrain oyster-boat, visited with Confederate privates and officers all along his route, and managed to ingratiate himself with die-hard rebels in New Orleans and mid-level businessmen in other southern cities.

Corsan's narrative is somewhat unusual in its description of the economic state of the Confederacy in the war's second autumn. Although stores in New Orleans and other cities were suffering from a lack of business, at another level, the economy was booming, at least from Corsan's point of view. Cotton–the greatest symbol and reality of southern economic life–was stacked up everywhere, and businessmen crowded the thoroughfares. As a merchant himself, Corsan was naturally interested in Confederate finances, the profits to be made in blockade-running, and the state of the southern currency, all of which he speculated about at some length.

Corsan's narrative has about it, something of the grateful traveler's assumption that everything his hosts tell him is the truth. He presents as gospel the worst rumors of Gen. Benjamin Butler's atrocities in New Orleans (his original subtitle was "Including a Visit to New Orleans Under the Domination of General Butler," p. xii). He apparently hated slavery, yet in the book he glides over the issue lightly and at one point depicts a group of slaves happily, even excitedly, waiting to be sold at auction. He generalizes that all Confederate soldiers, despite their motley appearance, were brave, patriotic, and even polite; describes Confederate politicians as "disinterested, pure" men who "look more to the success of their cause than anything else" (p. 99); stresses that the patriotism of southern women is so sincere that they sent their menfolk back to the army before their furloughs expired; and confidently explains that Union soldiers, as city boys, are too used to luxury and sedentary lifestyles to be good fighters. He also declares that there is "absolutely no Union sentiment in the South" (p. 133).

Corsan seems to be pandering to the wishful thinking of those sections of English society who favored southern victory. His confident prediction that the South would ultimately win its independence and build a secure and diversified economy betrays his superficial awareness of southern realities. The book is probably most useful for its reflection of the prevailing understanding–or misunderstanding–among common Englishmen of the nature of the war and the prospects of the Confederacy. The narrative is well-written, with glimpses of striking details: prisoners at Richmond's infamous Libby Prison spitting out windows at passers-by; the skeleton-strewn fields of the Seven Days' Battles viewed several months

after the carnage; the bustling, optimistic southerners packed into the passenger cars, omnibuses, and dingy hotels of the Confederacy.

Trask has performed an impressive job of editing this previously obscure book. Not the least of his accomplishments is actually identifying and tracing the movements of its heretofore unknown author. Voluminous footnotes identify individuals and reveal Corsan's itinerary, explain Confederate economic policy and military strategy, and correct the Englishman's frequent factual errors. However, sometimes this strength becomes a weakness. Editors of primary documents–including, on occasion, this reviewer–sometimes are so determined to draw every bit of use out of the document and get so caught up in the triumph of discovering just the right bit of trivia, that their notes can sometimes overwhelm the text. For instance, after Corsan quotes the patriotic verse on a Confederate envelope, Trask offers two footnotes taking up over half a page, on the shortage of paper in the Confederacy and on the term "grapeshot," which appeared in the quote. On other occasions, he defines "bowie knife"–mentioned in the text only in their absence among the Confederates Corsan encounters–and the origins of the term "Dixie"–surely too well-known for likely readers of this book. In these cases, the notes offer information that is merely distracting rather than vital in placing Corsan's words in their appropriate contexts. It would also have been useful if details relevant to understanding Corsan's narrative –the mechanics of blockade-running, or the Confederate defenses at Mobile, for instance–would have been placed in short introductions to each chapter, rather than in a series of long and potentially intrusive footnotes. Trask has already broken up the previously undivided account into chapters; a few paragraphs highlighting the most necessary and pertinent information would not seriously disrupt the flow of the narrative. Yet the strength of this edition of *Two Months in the Confederate States* lies in its editor's prodigious efforts to make it into a useful primary document. For the most part, he has succeeded.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and to the list. For other permission, please contact h-net@h-net.msu.edu. [The book review editor for H-CivWar is Daniel E. Sutherland <dsutherl@comp.uark.edu>.]

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: James Marten. Review of Corsan, W. C., *Two Months in the Confederate States: An Englishman's Travels Through the South*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. March, 1997.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=869

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.