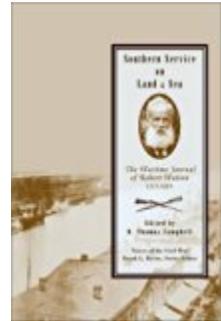


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

R. Thomas Campbell, ed. *Southern Service on Land and Sea: The Wartime Journal of Robert Watson, CSA/CSN*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002. vi + 207 pp. \$37.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57233-193-8.

Reviewed by Jason Frawley (Department of History, Texas Christian University)
Published on H-CivWar (January, 2004)



The Journal of a Soldier and a Seaman

The Journal of a Soldier and a Seaman

Southern Service on Land and Sea: The Wartime Journal of Robert Watson, CSA/CSN is the most recent addition to the Voices of the Civil War series published by the University of Tennessee. Edited by the late Frank L. Byrne of Kent State University, this series provides a valuable supply of primary source materials that illuminate issues on both the battlefield and the homefront. The editor of this particular volume, R. Thomas Campbell, is a North Carolina native and Pennsylvania resident who has published extensively on issues concerning the Confederate Navy. *Southern Service on Land and Sea* is a worthy addition to the series, providing a unique glimpse into the life of a Confederate soldier-seaman who served in Florida, Tennessee, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia, respectively.

Robert Watson, a native Bahamian who immigrated to Florida with his family in 1857 at the age of twenty-two, worked as a carpenter in federally controlled Key West when he decided to volunteer for the Southern service. After departing for Nassau in September 1861, Watson made his way to Jacksonville, Florida, where he enlisted in the Florida Coast Guard. His company, composed of men from Key West, and appropriately named The Key West Avengers, was stationed near Tampa Bay, where it served to hinder the Federal blockade and protect against coastal depredations into the summer of 1862. While the first portion of Watson's diary, entitled "War Comes to Florida," does contain a vivid description

of a ship running the Federal blockade near Mayport, the vast majority of the section is devoted to the tedium of camp life around Tampa Bay. Watson and his fellow Avengers engaged in boat races, enjoyed the company of the "fair sex," and drank everything from whisky and wine to cane beer and eggnog in an effort to pass the time (p. 22).

The second portion of Watson's journal, "The War in Tennessee," picks up in the final days of June 1862 as The Key West Avengers are organized into Company K of the Seventh Florida Infantry and sent to reinforce Confederate General Braxton Bragg's Army of Tennessee in preparation for the proposed campaign into middle Tennessee and Kentucky. Between the summer of 1862 and the winter of 1863-64, Watson's Company K participated in a battle with Union forces at Graham's Ferry on the Tennessee River, engaged in picket duty at Loudon and Knoxville, fought with distinction at the battle of Chickamauga, took part in the siege of Chattanooga, and performed valiantly in the defeat at Missionary Ridge. Although Watson's descriptions of the battles are brief, the true value of this section is in its depiction of soldier life. The accounts of the hard marches, the constant illness, and the scarcity of nutritional food present a lucid picture of the difficulties experienced by the soldiers of the Civil War.

This section of the journal is the most revealing, for the cauldron of war exposes much about Watson and the character of other common soldiers. Unhappy about

leaving his plush assignment in Tampa Bay, Watson declares that Confederate soldiers are “treated like dogs everywhere,” and in response to the hardships of war, namely the lack of food, Watson writes of soldier depredations on the citizenry of the South: “we had to steal from citizens” (p. 47); “at night ‘Jack the Rat’ my messmate went in the country and conscripted a fine bag of potatoes” (p. 65); and “over 50 men were absent without leave in the country foraging” (p. 67). Generally, much is made about Union theft and destruction of Confederate property, but Watson provides readers with evidence that the Confederate soldiers committed some of the same transgressions against their own citizens.

After petitioning Confederate Secretary of the Navy Stephen Russell Mallory, a fellow Floridian, Watson and several members of his company were shifted to aid in the defense of the important Confederate port city of Savannah, Georgia, in March 1864. The final portion of the journal, “The Confederate Navy,” deals with this transfer to Savannah and Watson’s service as a seaman aboard the ironclad C.S.S. *Savannah*. Reminiscent of his days in Tampa Bay, much of Watson’s time in Savannah was spent “most gloriously drunk” and in “houses of doubtful character” (p. 103). On December 21, 1864, Watson’s service in Savannah came to an end when the Confederates destroyed their ships and fled into South Carolina as Union General William Tecumseh Sherman advanced toward the city. Watson went on to serve at Fort Fischer, Fort Buchanan, and Drewry’s Bluff before being captured by Union forces near Appomattox on April 8, 1865. The journal ends with Watson refusing to take the Oath of Allegiance in Washington, D.C. As a result, he was denied passage to his home in Florida and forced to go to New York, where a friend loaned him the money to pay for passage to Havana, Cuba.

Robert Watson’s journal is unusual, for it provides a rare glimpse of Civil War Florida and presents readers with the extraordinary opportunity to examine the life of a man who served in both the Confederate Army and Navy. While Watson does not spend a lot of time reflecting on the meaning of the war or discussing battles and national politics in depth (he nearly forgets to mention that he was in Washington for Abraham Lincoln’s

assassination), he does supply readers with an abundant source of information on some of the Civil War’s more esoteric topics. He writes about alcohol abuse, Confederate depredations, Confederate deserters, race and ethnicity, prisoners, and prostitutes. He even discusses the capture of a “Yankee woman ... in the army in men’s clothing” (pg. 94). While his battle descriptions and political discussions are lacking, the information he presents on the day-to-day lives of Civil War soldiers proves invaluable.

R. Thomas Campbell does a masterful job in his editing, for he supplies readers with important footnotes and valuable chapter introductions without disturbing the tone of Watson’s writing. Although his proclivity for the title “War between the States” when referring to America’s Civil War is somewhat distracting, Campbell’s editing is balanced and fair. The maps, pictures, and appendices, which include muster rolls from the various organizations in which Watson served, are especially helpful in understanding the story of this soldier-seaman.

Overall, Campbell has done well to make public such a unique account of the Civil War. Robert Watson’s journal affords readers the chance to explore events in a number of Confederate states and cities, and his account of Florida provides a rare glimpse of a state that is generally relegated to the backwaters of Civil War history. Watson’s journal also depicts some of the less reputable characteristics of Civil War armies, introducing readers to a number of subjects that many soldiers were reluctant to discuss so openly. Students of Civil War history, especially those interested in soldier life, will benefit greatly from this important addition to the Voices of the Civil War series.

Copyright (c) 2004 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 other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

Scott L. Stabler PhD Candidate Arizona State University
H-CivWar Book Review Editor

History is not a was, but an is. - William Faulkner

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

Citation: Jason Frawley. Review of Campbell, R. Thomas, ed., *Southern Service on Land and Sea: The Wartime Journal*

of Robert Watson, CSA/CSN. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. January, 2004.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8820>

Copyright © 2004 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.