

Robert G. Evans, ed.. *The 16th Mississippi Infantry: Civil War Letters and Reminiscences*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002. vii + 365 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57806-486-1.



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For many years, Bell Wiley's books on the composite icons Johnny Reb and Billy Yank served as the most thorough interpretations of the Civil War soldier.[1] More recently, historians have employed new interpretive models in their study of Confederate and Union soldiers.[2] As a result, two distinct schools of thought have emerged. One group of scholars argues that Civil War soldiers were inspired by ideological "causes" such as slavery, democracy, republicanism, and self-government. The second group maintains that the men in the ranks were culturally conditioned by local definitions of honor, duty, courage, knightliness, and masculine identity.[3] The debate continues and perhaps the next trend in Civil War studies will be to construct regimental-based analyses in an attempt to fully understand the motivations of Civil War soldiers. If so, then such works as Robert G. Evans's *The Sixteenth Mississippi Infantry: Civil War Letters and Reminiscences* may prove useful to Civil War historians

Evans, a judge of the Thirteenth Circuit Court of the State of Mississippi, has compiled and edited the writings--letters, diaries, and postwar writ-

ings--of eighteen members of the 16th Mississippi. This group of Confederate soldiers from the "Piney Woods" area of central Mississippi fought in the Army of Northern Virginia and participated in such campaigns as the Shenandoah Valley Campaign, the Seven Days' Battles near Richmond, Antietam, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, the Wilderness, and were even part of the Confederate surrender at Appomattox. The sample group of eighteen, which included a wide representation of rank, from privates to brigadier generals, consisted of Samuel E. Baker, Buxton R. Conerly, Luke W. Conerly, John B. Crawford, Hugh C. Dickson, Winfield S. Featherston, Abram M. Fel-tus, William H. Hardy, Nathaniel H. Harris, Jesse R. Kirkland, James J. Kirkpatrick, John S. Lewis, William H. H. (Harry) Lewis, Ransom Lightsey, Carnot Posey, Issac R. Trimble, Jefferson J. Wilson, and Jerome B. Yates. Although Evans provides a cursory biographical sketch of each writer, someone should have advised Judge Evans that the federal census records would have provided detailed information about personal wealth, land ownership, slave holding, and additional socioeconomic data. Also, the *Compiled Service Records of Con-*

federate Soldiers Who Served in Organizations from the State of Mississippi should have been consulted for information on promotions, grievances, wounds, sicknesses, hospital stays, furloughs, and meritorious service. Unfortunately, Evans offers very little substantive context from which to understand these eighteen Confederates.

For the most part, the writings cover themes that are familiar to Civil War historians. The eighteen soldiers shared a deep concern regarding events on the home front, especially those related to the welfare of their respective families. They queried family and friends about such matters as crop yields, slave behavior, cotton prices, and household income, and offered advice and solutions to a multitude of problems. It was as if the soldiers were attempting to manage their homes and dependents from the front lines. Illustrative of this point was one captain who complained to his wife that the spelling and writing in his son's letters was atrocious. He warned her: "Now is the time to stop him and make him do better" (p. 55). Descriptions of camp life were abundant in the writings, with comments about poor or little food, inadequate shelter from the cold, rain, and heat, and substandard personal provisions filling countless pages.

Men such as Captain Jesse Kirkland ridiculed their commanding officers; he called Brigadier General Carnot Possey (another of Evans's eighteen writers) "one of the most consummate asses that ever occupied the position he does" (p. 55). Commander Robert E. Lee, however, was well liked. So much so, that Private J. B. Crawford instructed his wife to name their next male colt "Robert Lee" (p. 238). Throughout much of the war, the writers expressed great confidence in their cause and in their prospects for victory. In response to suggestions from the home front that the Confederate war effort was failing, one soldier remarked, "the Yankee says on to Richmond or to hell. I think it will be the latter with a great many of them" (p. 240). Toward the end of the war, bat-

tlefield defeats and attrition began to take its toll on the soldiers, and the writers commented with some regularity on the number of desertions from their ranks. There were a significant number of rather standard or basic accounts of troop movements and battlefield reports. Occasionally, a writer would depart from his normal topics and make brief but powerful observations. On July 4, 1862, one officer noted simply in his diary: "Everything quiet ... No one seems to think that today was once an observed anniversary" (p. 90). Religious services and revivals garnered the attention of several writers. All coveted the restraining and comforting influence of the Gospel, but they were of a divided mind on the qualifications and talents of battlefield pulpiteers and the degree to which religion was infiltrating the army. Without question the single greatest contributor or writer was Third Lieutenant William Henry Harrison Lewis. Aside from more thoughtful opinions on the aforementioned themes, Lewis addressed other important matters with a greater degree of sophistication than did the other seventeen writers. He provided an excellent analysis of the "enlistment" issue that the Confederate government faced in December 1861, explaining the pros and cons of the reenlistment offer made to the twelve-month volunteers. He also commented at some length about the medical treatment of wounded soldiers and about the need for more knowledgeable and experienced surgeons.

This book will appeal especially to those interested in Mississippi Civil War history and the Army of Northern Virginia. The 16th Mississippi Infantry participated in virtually all of the important battles in the Eastern Theater, and the eighteen writers offer a variety of perspectives on their personal struggles as well as those of their regiment and the Confederate army in general. More important, is the potential value of Evans's book for quasi-quantitative studies of soldiers' motivations, such as James McPherson's *For Cause and Comrades*. Regimental-based analyses of combat motivation could offer additional in-

sights into this complex question since many of these regiments were formed from a relatively small geographical area but were also comprised of a cross-section of the populace. The members of the 16th Mississippi were from the "Piney Woods" area of central Mississippi. Although Evans did not provide detailed socioeconomic information on the eighteen writers, certain inferences can be made. Namely, the respective ranks of the eighteen writers, which ranges from private to brigadier general, suggests that most socioeconomic groups were likely represented. If future studies of Civil War soldiers are to be conducted on the regimental level than Evans's book will be useful.

Notes

[1]. Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Life of Johnny Reb: The Common Soldier of the Confederacy* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1943); and *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1952). Two studies that follow Wiley's methodological approach are Larry Daniel, *Soldiering in the Army of Tennessee: A Portrait of Life in the Confederate Army* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), and James I. Robertson Jr., *Soldiers Blue and Gray* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988). Robertson was one of Wiley's students at Emory University.

[2]. For a brief overview of the new scholarship see Mark Grimsley, "In Not So Dubious Battle: The Motivations of American Civil War Soldiers," *Journal of Military History* 62 (January 1998): pp. 175-188.

[3]. The former group is led by James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). See also Joseph Allen Frank, *With Ballot and Bayonet: The Political Socialization of American Civil War Soldiers* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998); and Earl J. Hess, *The Union Soldier in Battle: Enduring the Ordeal of Combat* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press,

1997). The latter group is led by Reid Mitchell, *Civil War Soldiers: Their Expectations and Experiences* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988). See also Gerald F. Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: Free Press, 1987).

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