

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



David S. Moore, ed. *I Will Try to Send You All the Particulars of the Fight: Maps and Letters from New York State's Civil War Newspapers, 1861-1863*. Albany: Friends of the New York State Newspaper Project, 1995. x + 134 pp.

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Newspaper Civil War maps are marvelous pieces of work. I hesitate to say art, given the easy arguments that use of such a term inspires. And, it is true that sometimes map creators or engravers sacrificed both truth and beauty. Yet, the intricacies of line and detail and the elaborate positioning of troops, natural and human-made landmarks, trees, and various other objects—just the attention to detail—make many of these maps worthy of study from an aesthetic perspective alone.

We know, however, that they are valuable in more practical ways. They are, in essence, interpretations of battles and maneuvers. Far more than simple illustrations, Civil War (or any) maps represent someone's interpretation of what happened; they represent battles in much the same way models represent theories. A map attempts to show what happened.

From that perspective, the book under review is a compelling read. It offers explanations from thirty-three maps, but couples those with letters from soldiers who fought in the battles represented by the maps. This is a fine idea for a lot of reasons. It combines the graphic illustration and often helpful perspective of maps with the descriptive and sometimes emotional power of the printed word. The result is often a far better idea of a battle than either map or letter can convey alone.

The oversized, simply published paperback would likely be a worthwhile read for people interested in Civil War maps or letters, for people interested in the particular battles or facets of the war represented, or for people interested in general Civil War reading. Researchers can find the odd detail about a person, battle, or some other particular. They can find various perspectives on battles and often lesser known encounters, and they have an easy reference to illustrate strengths and weaknesses

of a participant's account, as well as map renderings of Civil War fighting.

Mostly though, the book is simply interesting to read, in part because editor David Moore has included a few features that make it easier to get involved in the letters. He provides a bibliographical appendix that lists all of the known authors of the letters, the details of their service, and often what happened to them after the war. In the letters, he includes footnotes to explain terms and expressions, identify people, correct misinformation, and add necessary details. The appendix makes the letter writers more than just names or initials, and, therefore, makes the reading of their letters more satisfying, even intimate, and the footnotes make the letters far more understandable.

The letter/map pairings give battles more dimension. A letter published in the *Cherry Valley Gazette* on July 30, 1862, describes battles at Savage's Station and White Oak Swamp. The writer, who signed his name only as "W," described a Rebel attack in which he said hundreds must have died. "The bullets and shells were dropping all around like hail, and it seemed impossible to escape them" (p. 93). After several days of bloody fighting, he got some respite, and he and what was left of his unit joined a division he thought would be less likely to go quickly into battle. "We are all well and feel good" (p. 94), he said at the end of the letter. Editor Moore is unsure of the identify of "W," but thinks it was likely William McLean of Cherry Valley. The appendix tells us that McLean died at Second Bull Run, the next battle in which he would have fought after the letter was written.

The Civil War, as all wars, is filled with greater ironies, but we often know only the greatest of them. Books such as this one bring home the simple, human

qualities we so often overlook in all the big battles and bigger-than-life heroics. Moore's helpful handling of the material makes it all the more valuable in this respect.

One example where the letter greatly enhances the map comes for May 17, 1862, in the *Irish American*. The map appeared in the *New York Herald* on May 4. It is a simple map, entitled "The Battle of Camden, Reconnoitering Operations of General Reno on the Rear of Norfolk, April 19" (p. 19). A county road "to Norfolk" divides brush, labeled but not illustrated, and woods, illustrated by curvy circles and semi-circles. Rebel batteries are drawn in at the top of the page (north), and Union positions are drawn in and labeled in the woods to the east and west. An arrow, drawn from the east woods to the road toward the Rebel batteries, is labeled "Charge of 9th N.Y." That is enough to give the reader a skeletal sense of what happened. It does not say who won, how many men were lost, or how long the battle lasted.

An accompanying letter, however, does. It is entitled (presumably from the newspaper account), "The 'Hawkins' Zouaves, 9th N.Y.V."; "The Battle of 'Vinegar Hill'"; "Camp Reno, Roanoke Island, N.C., April 22, 1862." A footnote explains that the battle was called many things, including River Bridge, South Mills, Camden, and Vinegar Hill. The letter was signed "JNG," making it probable that it was written by Private John N. Gray, who provides much detail on the march leading up to the battle. When they neared the Rebel batteries, his regiment left the road and took to the woods. After Rebel guns fell silent following a Union artillery barrage, Gray's unit led an attack on the Rebel lines, as illustrated by the map's arrow. Gray, however, says what the map could not say. When they got within two hundred yards of the Rebel lines:

All at once three or four cannon and about 1,500 rifles and shot guns opened on us, sending shot and shell as thick as hail-stones. At the first volley our boys went down flat on their bellies like a flash, which no doubt made the rebels think we were all killed; but the next instant they were up waving their red caps and cheering, and still pressing on towards them. Another and another volley followed; grape shot and pieces of shell plowed up the ground all around us; rifle ball and buck-shot whistled over and about us; our men were falling, dead and wounded, on all sides; but still our brave Zouaves did not flinch. They were too proud to retreat (p. 21).

Another interesting coupling of letter and map comes from Charles P. Boswell, who signed his letter "PALEY" (and referred to himself in the third person). The letter,

one of several he apparently routinely published in the *Courier(sic) and Freeman* was lengthy—five full pages of the book—and was one of three letters about the Seven Pines (or Fair Oaks) battle, another bloody encounter. The letter and the map are in Chapter Four, "The Peninsula Campaign," which is more coherent than most other chapters because several letters refer to the same battles. Boswell's map could not be engraved, so the editor had it set in type. The result was straight lines and numbers, vastly different from the engraved maps. The editor explains: "We cannot give the fine outlines or delicate shades of the woods, & c., as given in the drawing, but can assure our readers that Paley still 'holds his own'" (p. 81). The letter was incredibly detailed as to his unit's movements and activities. As did many letters, it corrected news reports, including one misreporting his own injury.

The Boswell letter and map represent the most potential realized in such a pairing of maps and letters, mainly because Boswell created both of them and referred freely to the map in his letter. It was easy to follow his movements and those of his fellow troops. No other correspondent was responsible for both letter and map in the book. The Boswell letter and map also point up the book's weaknesses as well.

While the pairing of maps and letters is interesting, it may not be particularly helpful for most researchers. Maps provide an overview, generally putting positions and directions in perspective, but they are weak in detail. They generally do not tell us more than their graphics can illustrate. The strengths of the letters are in detail, nuance, emotion. Still, each map and letter represents a single viewpoint; neither is representative of the battle or skirmish, even though each adds to the record and can contain valuable detail. One might see the book as contrived. With the exception of Boswell's contributions, maps and letters appeared in different papers at different times. Some Civil War era readers would have seen both letters and maps, but probably not many. In that sense, the worth of the couplings is measured only for our modern-day readings.

Further, selections are narrow. Moore included only maps and letters from before the Gettysburg campaign and, of course, only from New York, although within those bounds he tried to be geographically diverse. He also included materials from various branches of the military and some civilian services and from many battlefronts. Diversity is usually commendable, but in reporting bits and pieces of many activities, the book some-

times seemed incoherent. Plus, despite the more or less chronological order and introductions to each chapter, it is sometimes difficult to determine to what battle some letters refer. The most intriguing parts of the book come when several maps and letters cover the same battle.

The book has maps, letters, and often illustrations covering the following (which are chapter headings): Early battles, the Carolinas, Western Theater, Peninsula Campaign, Northern Virginia and Maryland Campaigns of 1862, Trans-Mississippi Theater, and the Chancellorsville Campaign.

It may well be that I have overlooked research possibilities, but without a doubt the letters and their annotated materials and accompanying maps are a satisfying, even entertaining read. The Civil War has been called the first literate war and apparently resulted in the exchange of millions upon millions of letters. Written without hindrance of censorship, they often included intimate details of a soldier's life and activities, including the battles. Henry Steele Commager once remarked that the narratives of the Confederacy were of higher literary quality than those of the North (*The Blue and the Gray*, [1982], p. xx), and it is true that these New York letters are, for the most part, detailed but mostly pedestrian. The writers were, essentially, reporters, often writing directly to editors. But even those who wrote to family members

and friends seemed to be addressing the general public. The Civil War supposedly awakened people's hunger for news, and these soldiers and other letter writers appeared to want very much to satisfy that hunger, often, for example, listing the wounded and dead much as we would expect a reporter to do. These correspondents read newspapers and were aware of mistakes and misconceptions, which they attempted to correct in their letters.

What is more amazing is that they wrote all of these letters under the most trying of circumstances—lousy paper and little of it, poor writing instruments, rain and dampness, exhaustion and fear, hunger, and amid rumor and misinformation. Yet letters were often clear, excruciatingly detailed, accurate, and, perhaps most surprising, witty. None of these had the tone or the kind of wit evidenced in the Civil War letters of, say, Oliver Wendell Holmes, but they remind us that the war was fought not just by young men, but by indomitable, complex young men with active minds and much to say.

These letters and maps also remind us that the Civil War's rich historical record is far from depleted.

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