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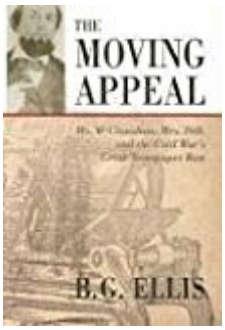
B. G. Ellis. *The Moving Appeal: Mr. McClanahan, Mrs. Dill, and the Civil War's Great Newspaper Run.* Macon: Mercer University Press, 2003. ix + 677 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-86554-764-3.



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As Grant neared Richmond and Sherman marched on Atlanta, John Reid McClanahan, editor of the *Memphis Daily Appeal*, rallied the Confederate faithful. Warning of a coming campaign that would "crush freedom" with aggression, and writing from the paper's temporary offices in Atlanta, McClanahan urged Southerners to stiffen their resolve:

"Let the cause-the war-command our time, our conversation. Let resistance, determined resistance, be seen everywhere. Let the timid be inspired with courage--let all who are able fly to their country's standard; and 'to arms ye braves' be resounded throughout the land. By a united effort we can easily shield our capital against the legions of Grant, dishearten the North, confuse the succession to the presidency, and do much to engender an unruly strife between the factions at the North" (p. 281).

Hard-driving and hard-drinking, McClanahan was the soul of the "Moving Appeal"--the celebrated Confederate newspaper-in-exile that evaded Union troops from the fall of Memphis in June 1862 to Lee's surrender at Appomattox in April 1865--a three-year period in which its editor would transport the paper's press and its publishing operations on a thousand-mile trek through three Southern states, just ahead of Yankee forces.

A passionate editorial writer whose philosophy of *nil desperandum* ("no lot is desperate") made his paper a staple with Confederate troops, the larger-than-life McClanahan is the narrative center of B.G. Ellis's ambitious history of the *Daily Appeal,* a paper variously known as "The Greatest Rebel of Them All," "The Bible of the Confederacy," and "that damned Rebel rag" (p. 1).

But Ellis, a former journalism professor at McNeese State University and Oregon State, tells a story that is larger than McClanahan alone. And if her mammoth 677-page study sometimes staggers under its own weight, its missteps--a sometimes confusing chronology, a dogged commitment to the minutiae of land deals and court battles--can be forgiven. With almost as many characters as Faulkner's Yoknopatawpha, Ellis's history is a full-throttle chronicle of one of nineteenth-century journalism's most unusual chapters.

That narrative begins--a bit confusingly--near its end with the funeral of Benjamin Franklin Dill, his "disconsolate" widow, Carolina, at the side of his full-glass coffin and a fleet of twenty funeral carriages just outside. That decision signals Ellis's fascination with the machinations of the couple who tried to wrest control of the *Appeal* from McClanahan's family after the editor's death (and after years of apparent embezzlement on the part of the entrepreneurial Dills). The daughter of small-time land speculator with social pretensions, Carolina Walker married the failed law student Benjamin Franklin Dill hoping for wealth and social cachet and instead embarked on a life that would include doctored accounting records, questionable real estate deals, and, as Ellis tells it, considerable business acumen and bravura. When McClanahan needed $20,000 for a press and a building for the *Appeal*, he turned to the Dills, who were bank and exchange dealers at the time. Shortly after, they became members of the *Appeal*'s staff who would exploit McClanahan's drinking to siphon off funds. On McClanahan's death, the ever-resilient Carolina Dill and her lawyers would argue that the editor's family showed no signs of continuing with the *Appeal*, and that Carolina, as the heir of McClanahan's only surviving partner, was the newspaper's real owner. But her suit would be unsuccessful; she would be evicted from the *Appeal* and flee Tennessee.

But the Dills remain the book's sideshow. The main stage belongs to McClanahan and the *Appeal*.

Born into a poor but respectable family of Piedmont dirt-farmers, John Reid McClanahan began his climb out of poverty as a newsboy for a local weekly, the *Truth Teller and District Sentinel*. There, Ellis writes, McClanahan acquired a keen first-hand sense of what sells newspapers, and there he began his journey from the street corner to the newsroom. At the age of 25, McClanahan acquired controlling interest in the Memphis *Republican* and began instituting the kinds of changes that had made New York editor James Gordon Bennett a national name--a simpler nameplate that was readable at two hundred yards, a larger format, a lower price, and hard-hitting editorials.

When war with Mexico broke out, McClanahan sold his interest in the *Republican* to join the Second Tennessee Volunteers. Returning to Memphis after the carnage at the Battle of Cerro Gordo, he found the city's only remaining Democratic newspaper, the *Appeal*, near bankruptcy and bought into it, building its circulation with a hardball adherence to delivering news that people would read. It was a journalism, Ellis notes, that followed in the tradition of Benjamin Day and James Gordon Bennett rather than in that of genteel British essayists like Joseph Addison and Sir Richard Steele.

When southern states began seceding, McClanahan urged caution. When caution failed, he became the voice of the Confederacy. And when Union troops took Memphis, he took his newspaper on the road--dismantling the press and moving it and his staff first to Grenada and Jackson, Mississippi, then to Atlanta, and finally to Montgomery, Alabama. In each town he announced his plan to be a "friendly visitor" rather than a revenue thief; in each he smoothed the *Appeal*'s way by offering small printing orders to local papers and warming up local editors by quoting their editorials. And in each he sought new readers and a national reputation. Regimental rates, introductory copies for military members, pass-along copies for hospital wards--McClanahan promoted his paper with unbridled zeal and published without fear. In Atlanta, the *Appeal*'s press run continued even after the newspaper's offices suffered two direct hits from Yankee bombs.

Even more important to the paper's success was McClanahan's cultivation of a network of field sources and reporters that allowed him to deliver exclusives that would be reprinted in newspapers from New York to Europe. As the war

began, the editor hired John Reuben Thompson ("DIXIE") to cover Richmond--a hire that gave McClanahan the voice of someone inside Jefferson Davis's social circle. Thomas E. Coffey ("TEC") provided him with the "blood on the breakfast table":

"Heaps of dead bodies are (or were) scattered about, forty to one hundred being sometimes found within an area of a few yards--heads without bodies, all parts of the human frame scattered about. Some are seen as if quietly sleeping; one sits by a hedge row, with half his head blown off--there he sits. Some are crouched in the ditch, with guns clasped in their hands, huddled together in death; friend lies with foe ... the grass is all trodden flat, and gory, while the springs and brooks are clotted with blood where the wounded have crept to drink or die, while bodies are frequently fished out and buried. For four whole days and nights did the federalists leave their killed and wounded on our hands!" (p. 122)

Some things are bound to be lost in a narrative with so many threads, so many characters, so many documents, behind it. For this reader, Carolina Dill's portrait isn't drawn as fully as McClanahan's is. Others might criticize the book for its neglect of the complexities of battle strategies and political developments--but that's no surprise given that the story is told from the vantage point of the press rather than political leaders or generals. And some might balk at the book's appeal to a popular audience. Overall, though, Ellis's ***Moving Appeal*** is a spirited, interesting read that provides a window into the world of Confederate newspapers and Confederate life.