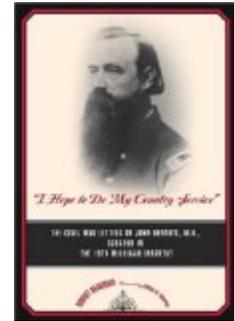


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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert Beasecker, ed. *I Hope To Do My Country Service: The Civil War Letters of John Bennett, M.D., Surgeon, 19th Michigan Infantry*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005. xxv + 409 pp. \$56.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8143-3170-5.

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Faithful to God, Loyal to the Union

John Bennett was a prosperous 31-year-old physician in Centreville, St. Joseph County, Michigan when the Civil War began. By late 1861, however, that prosperity had disappeared. Faced with mounting debt and patients unwilling or unable to make good on their “obligations” to him, Bennett looked for a more secure occupation than small-town doctor. Despite a strong attachment to his wife and children, he joined the newly formed 19th Michigan Infantry as the regiment’s assistant surgeon in the summer of 1862. Bennett was a prolific writer, and more than 200 of the letters he sent to his family during three years of army service are now at the Grand Valley State University Library.

Even though a veritable flood of similar works appear each month in book catalogs, *I Hope to Do My Country Service* is somewhat unique. Published letter collections from members of Michigan regiments are relatively uncommon, and such an extensive grouping from a well-educated, perceptive, and articulate army surgeon is likewise unusual.

Unfortunately, both the talented physician’s abilities and his regiment’s assignments ensured that Bennett would see little combat until the last year of the war. By the end of 1862, the 19th Michigan was still in Kentucky and Bennett was in charge of his division’s hospital, thereby avoiding the butchery at Stones River. Incredibly, in the spring of 1863, when the Michigan men finally did see combat, two disasters befell them in quick succession. Most of the 19th Michigan surrendered at Thomp-

son’s Station, Tennessee on March 5 after a sharp fight with General Earl Van Dorn. A mere twenty days later, the remainder of the Wolverines, including Bennett, were taken at Brentwood, Tennessee by Nathan Bedford Forrest.

Bennett was exchanged after a few weeks as a prisoner of war. Following the regiment’s reorganization, he returned with his men to the Army of the Cumberland in time for the Tullahoma campaign, but the 19th went to garrison Murfreesboro and did not participate in the Battle of Chickamauga. The end of 1863 found Bennett promoted to surgeon and his regiment at McMinnville, Tennessee, having missed the Siege of Chattanooga.

Finally, the 19th Michigan received a chance to redeem itself for Thompson’s Station. During the Atlanta Campaign, the unit formed part of General Joseph Hooker’s Twentieth Army Corps, and Bennett served in brigade, division, and corps hospitals. The regiment performed well during the fighting at Resaca, New Hope Church, and Peachtree Creek. After Atlanta’s fall, the Michigan men marched with Sherman to Savannah. While the 19th moved through the Carolinas, Bennett went to Charleston to care for the “odds and ends of all commands” (a brigade of stragglers) (p. 349). He rejoined his comrades shortly before the Confederate surrender. Bennett marched in the Grand Review in Washington, D.C. in May 1865 and returned home the following month.

Many of Bennett’s letters contain the typical concerns

of Civil War soldiers—the weather, rations, personal finances, comments on the competence of superior officers, and the well-being of those left at home. Although readers might expect extensive comments about medical matters, Bennitt only occasionally mentions the treatment of the wounded and sick.

This does not mean that Bennitt's letters have no value. The young army surgeon had strong opinions about certain issues, and his remarks on these topics make for interesting reading. For instance, Bennitt lamented the chaotic nature of life in Kentucky and Tennessee. From the former, he informed his family that "This section has been alternately in the hands of Union Men & Rebels—each dominant party in turn preying upon the weaker until but little comparatively is left." The "Iron heel of war" had ruined "Poor-Poor Kentucky" (pp. 61-62). Tennessee was no better, with robbery, murder, and destruction clearly evident. "Nearly everything is eaten up or destroyed," Bennitt observed, "and unless this war shall close before long this country will become an uninhabited wilderness again" (p. 258).

Bennitt was an extremely religious soldier. He clearly placed his fate in God's hands, and believed that "He will bring about that which will be for the best for those that put their trust in him." To Bennitt, God was also the source of sectional conflict, for "Our national pride and boasting are obnoxious in His sight, and as a nation we have been terribly punished and how much more we are to be punished He only knows." "Our total overthrow and humiliation is necessary," Bennitt believed, "for the purification of this people" (p. 306). This punishment and purification was necessary as penance for the national sin of slavery. "Ever since the first Battle of Bull Run in 1861 I have been fully satisfied that the hand of God was especially in this war," Bennitt wrote, "and that we would not see the end until we were ready to put away oppression from all the land, and allow the four million of bond-men go free." The "terrible bloodletting" had become necessary "for the salvation of our country. But my trust is ... by this fearful scourge much good will yet come" (p. 270).

Bennitt was determined to do his part by maintaining a strong devotion to the Union cause and a desire for a vigorous prosecution of the war. Although he longed to return to his family, a sense of duty and responsibility kept him at the front: "unless our country is saved there is no assurance to any of the enjoyment of home." "Give us war however in preference to a dishonorable peace," Bennitt urged. "Let the fight go on till treason shall be fully punished, and the cause of the rebellion"—Slavery—

"shall no more find a supporter or an apologist in America," he wrote his wife. "Much as I love you, I feel that it is proper for me to remain as I am so long as the prospect of usefulness is greater here than elsewhere" (p. 119).

Like other Union soldiers, Bennitt also came to believe that the war was about much more than enslaved African Americans, however. "This is a great war of principal for the whole world. The spirit of oppression is arrayed against freedom," he argued. "All the world looks on to see the result. It is not the question of negro or African slavery simply—but a question of Slavery in the abstract. Shall one man enslave, buy & sell & do what he pleases with his fellow man, without reference to his rights & the world look on and permit it—or shall evil men be taught that every man of whatever race or nation has God-given, inalienable rights that must be respected. Copperheads at home know nothing of what they speak when they talk about this be a 'war for the niggers.' It is a war for the maintenance of the principle of justice & right" (p. 181).

Although he regarded slavery as a great evil, Bennitt did not initially express high regard for African Americans. As was the case with some of his comrades, Bennitt's views changed during his time in the army. In early 1864 he wrote, "My convictions are that the Black race is inferior by nature and that if every master was a true Christian & would treat his servants as children should be treated that a condition of servitude would be better for them than unconditional emancipation" (p. 244). By April 1865, however, he believed that it was better that the ballot should be given a loyal black man than a traitorous white. The rising generation of blacks would be much more intelligent and learned than the present generation of Southern whites, he predicted. "I am almost a negro equality man," he proclaimed, for "History has shown the Black race at times superior. Why not again? [E]specially if we sin so deeply toward them, God will cast us down and raise them up. It is time for America to be wise, and be taught by events in all past times, to be just" (p. 369).

Beasecker's "biographical note" and chapter introductions provide useful background material, and his numerous helpful notes explain the terms, personalities, and events mentioned in Bennitt's correspondence.

Although readers may find the lack of descriptions of combat, battlefield medicine, and hospital administration disappointing, the letters of John Bennitt do provide useful details for larger studies of soldier motivation, views on race, army religion, and wartime conditions in Kentucky and Tennessee.

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