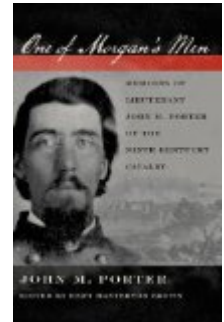


Kent Masterson Brown, ed.. *One of Morgan's Men: Memoirs of Lieutenant John M. Porter of the Ninth Kentucky Cavalry*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011. xix + 300 pp. \$32.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8131-2990-7.



Reviewed by Scott Hilderbrandt

Published on H-CivWar (January, 2012)

Commissioned by Hugh F. Dubrulle (Saint Anselm College)

Research and publications on the Civil War era have flourished since the centennial and will continue to do so as the sesquicentennial unfolds over the next three years. As a consequence, an inundation of recent scholarship on the West, a much-neglected area when compared with the eastern theater, has allowed for nuanced interpretations to enhance our understanding of this region. Kentucky played a vital part in shaping the conflict in the West. Unfortunately, this state's role in the war is often relegated to histories that incorporate Kentucky into broader campaigns, a tack that is detrimental to comprehending the complexities of how the fighting emerged and evolved in this key border state. In *One of Morgan's Men: Memoirs of Lieutenant John M. Porter of the Ninth Kentucky Cavalry*, Kent Masterson Brown, a published author of books on Kentucky in the Civil War, masterfully pieces together the memoirs of Lieutenant John M. Porter, who served under the (in)famous cavalry commander General John H. Morgan. In the process, Brown

provides an accessible version of this significant memoir.

For quite some time, the scholarship on Morgan's command remained mostly top-down in its methodological approach, with attention focused on Morgan and battle tactics he employed while on campaign. Basil W. Duke, an officer who served with Porter, composed the first history of Morgan's unit in 1867.[1] The majority of publications that followed were tainted with Lost Cause-inspired interpretations of Morgan and his cavalry that indulged in romantic and often anachronistic portrayals of dashing troopers causing havoc among Union forces.[2] Modern interpretation of the exploits of Morgan's forces has progressed beyond these antiquated histories and realigned the importance of Morgan and his men within the context of how they influenced both Union and Confederate operations in the West.[3] *One of Morgan's Men* contributes to the analysis of Morgan's command and of other Confederate units that specialized in unconventional tactics, as well as to an understanding of the impact of this style

of warfare on soldier and civilian alike—all from the perspective of a lower-ranking officer.

Brown divides Porter's memoir into fourteen chapters that follow chronological order, with each chapter detailing a significant event or series of events. The first two chapters open with Porter describing how he entered Confederate service, joining "Buckner's Guides" as a scout operating in several Kentucky counties. Porter was captured for the first time by Union troops just after the fall of Fort Donelson in February 1862. Masquerading as a civilian, however, he escaped from Union captivity and joined Morgan's cavalry, then on a raid near the Kentucky state capital of Lexington. Shortly thereafter, Porter was involved in his first battle at Cynthiana, Kentucky, and pursued retreating Union troops south into Tennessee. Chapters 6 and 7 detail a second great ride into Kentucky that Porter participated in, ending in the general retreat of Confederate forces from said state as they settled into Murfreesboro, Tennessee, in the final months of 1862. However, it is in chapter 8 that Porter explains the famous "Christmas Raid," when Morgan's entire command was tasked with destroying the railroad lines supplying Union forces in Nashville. The raid was a success, yet the Army of Tennessee was compelled to retreat after the battle of Stones River (Murfreesboro) in January 1863. Chapter 9 is devoted to this withdrawal, as Confederate cavalry played a crucial role in fighting rear-guard actions to delay the advance of the Army of the Cumberland.

The latter half of *One of Morgan's Men* delves into the planning and execution of Morgan's last, and perhaps most exceptional, raid. Chapter 10, chapter 11, and chapter 12 focus on attempts by Morgan to lead an expedition into Union-occupied Kentucky and other states loyal to the United States. The first foray ended in failure when a Confederate deserter reported the presence of Morgan to federal troops. The second endeavor resulted in the successful crossing of Morgan's forces into Indiana and Ohio. Porter, part of an

advance scouting mission to find suitable locations to ford the Ohio River, was captured and sent to Johnson's Island Prisoner of War Depot on Lake Erie near Sandusky, Ohio. In the final two chapters Porter briefly details his nineteen-month internment on Johnson's Island and his futile attempts to rejoin the Confederate army. Once paroled, Porter moved from Ohio to Virginia and North Carolina where his old regiment surrendered to General William T. Sherman in the closing days of April 1865. Porter then sought to join General Edmund Kirby Smith, but was unable to reach the Trans-Mississippi Department before Smith surrendered. It was here that Porter decided to return to Kentucky.

Brown presents a thoroughly researched text that allows one to understand the actions that Porter participated in, as well as the context surrounding the events that impacted Porter's life during the war. Brown relates that the original typescript of Porter's narrative was found in a rather incoherent state with an abundance of run-on sentences, grammatical and spelling errors, as well as a few unconnected trains of thought. Another problem was that the manuscript was full of ambiguous names and places known mostly to Porter, but not to today's readers and scholars. With the advice of Dr. James Ramage, professor of history at Northern Kentucky University, Brown used state and federal census records and archives, family histories, and relevant secondary source material to identify fellow soldiers and civilians that Porter encountered. A brief introduction at the beginning of each chapter adds context for a better appreciation of events in that chapter. However, when it comes to the endnotes, one may have trouble distinguishing between informative notations and an AAA travel guide. Regardless of this minor fault, Brown's research provides an accessible record of a junior officer's service and adds to the history of one of the Confederacy's most celebrated legions.

Apart from the technical merits of Brown's editorial accomplishments, one of the main strengths of this memoir is that readers are clearly presented with the ideas and motives that prompted Porter to enlist and which sustained him throughout the war. Porter and his family were unique in that they owned slaves, albeit a small number, which was unusual but not uncommon in Butler County, Kentucky, where Porter resided. Furthermore, Butler County was largely pro-Union, a situation that made Porter's decision to take up the secessionist cause all the more dangerous for him. It is here that *One of Morgan's Men* should be noted for its contribution to understanding the severity of the conflict that pitted Kentuckian against Kentuckian.

While Porter maintained a good record of his exploits during the war, the account is ultimately a biased one. Peppered throughout his memoirs are unflattering references to Home Guard units (pro-Union militias formed when civil war broke out in 1861) and regular troops of the Union army. For example, while spending the night in a recently captured steamboat, Porter wrote the boat was "filthy because it had been transporting Federal troops" (p. 35). When Porter was taken prisoner in 1863, a Union officer withheld clothing intended for Porter. He comments, "these little exhibitions of meanness were characteristic of the Yankees" (p. 193). It becomes obvious that Porter held a grudge against those who remained loyal to the United States and was fiercely loyal to the Southern cause. Perhaps one of the strongest statements Porter delivers in support of the Confederacy comes near the end, when he asserts that "a more gallant contest had never been waged ... [and a] more noble army never enlisted and fought" (p. 193). Given these claims, readers must take what Porter writes with a grain of salt.

Notwithstanding Porter's disposition with regard to the Union, the publication of his memoir allows access to a valuable interpretation not only of a soldier's participation in the development

and employment of unconventional warfare tactics during the Civil War, but also the severe hostility between Kentuckians who sided with the Union and those who took up the cause of secession. Since Porter resided in a county that had a majority of pro-Union inhabitants, one wonders if Porter wrote to spite those who supported the Union and to sanctify the soldiers and civilians who defended the Confederacy. Readers must be cognizant of ulterior motives and bias when reading postwar accounts, and this memoir is no exception. *One of Morgan's Men*, as edited by Kent Masterson Brown, ultimately confirms many of the recent works, such as James McPherson's *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (1997), Earl J. Hess's *The Union Soldier in Battle: Enduring the Ordeal of Combat* (1997), Aaron Sheehan-Dean's *The View from the Ground: Experiences of Civil War Soldiers* (2007), and Jason Phillips's *Diehard Rebels: The Confederate Culture of Invincibility* (2007), that have made incredible contributions to understanding the motivations and sustaining factors of those who fought in the Civil War.

Notes

[1]. Basil W. Duke, *History of Morgan's Cavalry* (Cincinnati: Miami Printing and Pub. Co., 1867).

[2]. See Cecil Fletcher Holland, *Morgan and His Raiders: A Biography of the Confederate General* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1942). This is perhaps the last history to portray Morgan in such a manner.

[3]. Edison H. Thomas, *John Hunt Morgan and His Raiders* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1985). See also James A. Ramage, *Rebel Raider: The Life of General John Hunt Morgan* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986).

chapter

(p. 2)

is when he stated

writes

hat he desired to have his text

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

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

Citation: Scott Hilderbrandt. Review of Brown, Kent Masterson, ed. *One of Morgan's Men: Memoirs of Lieutenant John M. Porter of the Ninth Kentucky Cavalry*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. January, 2012.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33913>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.