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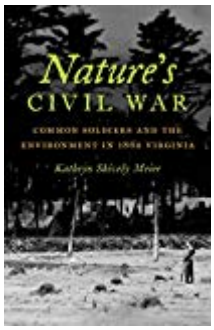

Kathryn Shively Meier. *Nature's Civil War: Common Soldiers and the Environment in 1862 Virginia.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013. 256 pp. $39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4696-1076-4.

Reviewed by Angela Riotto

Published on H-War (June, 2014)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Recognizing Civil War scholars' tendency to overlook common soldiers' health care networks, Kathryn Shively-Meier combines environmental, medical, and military history methodologies to explore both Union and Confederate soldiers' understandings of nature's effect on their physical and mental health. She argues that during the 1862 Peninsula and Shenandoah Valley Campaigns, both Union and Confederate soldiers established successful, informal networks for sharing environmental knowledge and providing health care long before the armies introduced efficient military medical institutions. By exploring these soldiers' daily interactions with nature, even down to the most mundane acts of latrine placement and berry collection, Meier reinvigorates what she calls the "stalled field" of Civil War common soldier studies (p. 8).

Meier asserts that until now, scholars have not offered a medical history of Civil War soldiers because it has been impossible to do so within the traditional framework employed by military historians. She stresses that military historians must expand their analyses to include environmental history if they hope to understand fluctuations in morale and the soldiers' various approaches to health and the environment. Consequently, Meier hopes that this ethnographic history will provide the much-needed insight into Civil War soldiers' experiences, both in camp and on the march.

To correct the considerable gaps in the literature, Meier offers this work as a case study. According to Meier, the 1862 Peninsula and Shenandoah Valley Campaigns provide an appealing opportunity for research controls because they took place in approximately the same time period and roughly two hundred miles apart. Meier composed her sample of Confederate and Union soldiers' health issues using letters, diaries, and memoirs that cover the winter of 1861-62 through August 1862. By noting each self-reported instance of sickness—from minor headaches to extended hospitalizations, including changes in mental state such as loneliness, homesickness, or "the blues,"—she presents an impressive medical

history of the common soldier in 1862 Virginia (p. 7).

Meier's choice to compare these two campaigns is the strength of her work. As she explains, although Union major general George McClellan's Peninsula Campaign and Confederate lieutenant general Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson's Shenandoah Valley Campaign occurred simultaneously, each met with distinct natural obstacles and health concerns. For example, both Union and Confederate soldiers understood Virginia's peninsula as a virulent disease-ridden environment for its festering swamps, while they perceived the Shenandoah Valley as healthy for its fertile soil and fresh mountain air. Yet, as wartime writings clearly illustrate, both campaigns took a toll on the men's health; and Union and Confederate soldiers throughout Virginia tried desperately to forge habits to stay healthy, long before military commanders developed institutionalized responses.

With her adept use of imagery and the inclusion of soldiers' voices from her sample, Meier successfully refreshes the Civil War common soldier scholarship. Not only does she highlight how soldiers employed their own health care strategies outside of the military establishment, such as self-care routines, taking civilian advice, collecting newspapers, and if needed, straggling, but she also illuminates previous historians' oversimplification of the tension between commissioned officers and their men regarding straggling—the act of moving to the rear or leaving the column to visit family and friends, collect supplies, avoid battle, or recover from poor health. By examining the controversy that erupted between commanders and their men regarding straggling, Meier reveals that what many officers perceived as an erosion of discipline was, in some cases, merely a soldier's attempt to preserve his individual health. Meier further shows that, when viewed from the ranks, informal acts of self-care—such as locating clean water, seeking additional exercise, or searching for medicinal roots—seem reasonable, but from the command perspective, "the armies had fallen into a dangerous state of disorder" (p. 134). Therefore, not only does Meier demonstrate how common soldiers formed networks of environmental knowledge and health care, but she also provides insight into the pressures of army life, officer-soldier tensions, and the limited logistical capacities of the armies.

Similarly to her discussion of straggling, Meier's exploration of the seasoning process marks this book as a must-read for scholars interested in the Civil War common soldier. Meier's analysis of soldiers' self-care routines proves that many coordinated their reactions to, and understandings of, illness. For instance, some men believed exposure to the "environment of war" (rain, darkness, cold, wet clothes and blankets, mud, etc.) contributed to their sickness, so from that time on, they established health care regimens to be shared with their peers, especially new recruits who had not yet fallen ill (p. 131). Meier proves that experiencing illness and combat did not merely make a one a "seasoned soldier," but rather, over time, men acquired, encouraged, and celebrated the skills required to look after their bodies (p. 148). In fact, by understanding and mitigating environmental impacts on their physical and mental health, both Union and Confederate soldiers made themselves seasoned soldiers.

While Meier's artful use of imagery and inclusion of soldiers' voices make *Nature's Civil War* an enjoyable and informative read, her description of military events, commanders' roles, and battle reports can, at times, seem superfluous. For those familiar with the campaigns, her assessment of individual engagements occasionally detracts from her examination of soldier health care. Yet, despite this minor shortcoming, Meier's book successfully refreshes the common soldier scholarship and launches a worthy discussion of their approaches to health care and the environ-

ment. For this reviewer, it is no wonder that an earlier version of this work won the 2011 Coffman Prize from the Society of Military Historians.

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Citation: Angela Riotto. Review of Meier, Kathryn Shively. *Nature's Civil War: Common Soldiers and the Environment in 1862 Virginia.* H-War, H-Net Reviews. June, 2014.

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