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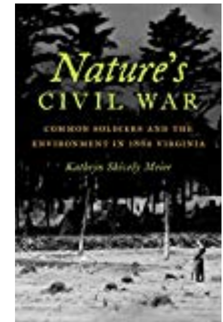

Kathryn Shively Meier. *Nature's Civil War: Common Soldiers and the Environment in 1862 Virginia.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013. 256 pp. $39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4696-1076-4.

Reviewed by Matthew Hulbert

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Commissioned by Bonnie Laughlin-Schultz (Eastern Illinois University)

Whereas once Bell Wiley's ***The Life of Johnny Reb*** (1943) and ***The Life of Billy Yank*** (1952) represented the gold standard of rank-and-file soldier studies, Civil War scholars of all stripes—social, cultural, and military—are rapidly breaking new ground in creative ways. Covering topics from landscapes and ecosystems marred by contact with armies to the effects of battlefield trauma and physical injury on the human mind to how lingering memories of the conflict influenced the postbellum lives of veterans, recent historians have delved much deeper into the soldier experience than the routines of camp or regional characteristics.[1] In ***Nature's Civil War: Common Soldiers and the Environment in 1862 Virginia***, Kathryn Shrively Meier attempts to merge these new approaches. The results are intriguing, though occasionally difficult to interpret.

Meier's stated goal is to produce a "bottom up" social history of how enlisted men, both Union and Confederate, perceived the role of the environment on their well-being and simultaneously developed similar methods of staying healthy (read: alive) as disease-related fatalities far outpaced combat deaths. From the beginning, Meier carefully prefaces the conditions and parameters of her study. This is not, she notes, a history of grotesque battlefield injuries or hacked-off limbs—nor is it a study of how "crowd diseases" ravaged the ranks. Alternatively, ***Nature's Civil War*** focuses on environmental diseases such as typhoid, dysentery, diarrhea, malarial fevers, and scurvy, as well as the subsequent psychological infirmities they spawned. As sample cases of the afflicted (or, perhaps more notably, those who managed to avoid sickness), Meier examines the men who partook in Union general George McClellan's ill-fated Peninsula Campaign and Confederate general Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson's more successful Valley Campaign, both of which played out in Virginia in 1862.

The concept at the heart of the ***Nature's Civil War*** is "self-care." Though never defined once and for all in the text, self-care is gradually explained as the adaptive measures taken by individual soldiers (or groups of soldiers that Meier calls "unof-

ficial networks of care") to remain healthy in the face of harsh environmental conditions, some natural, and others, such as contaminated water and soil, often created by the very men whose health they endangered. Self-care practices, Meier contends, grew from a number of factors. Men of martial age in 1862 had grown up with the Jacksonian Era's "do it yourself" spirit and applied this principle to the personal care of body and mind. Additionally, Meier offers that hospitals and asylums were alien to most antebellum Americans, for whom family homes had served as centers of medical knowledge and healing. Therein, by the time men joined the Union and Confederate armies, they had been trained since birth to approach professional or institutionalized medical care with great suspicion.

According to Meier, self-care strategies ranged widely in complexity and ingenuity. Methods could involve finding better-than-normal shelter from rain, heat, or cold; they might include creative bedding to avoid contact with the wet, muddy ground or to quell the sleep deprivation that went hand-in-hand with an active campaign; even still, strategies could also take the form of efforts to procure sanitary drinking water, to supplement a diet habitually lacking in vital nutrients, or to maintain proper levels of hygiene as swarms of pathogen-laden insects bore down on encamped men. Self-care could even be as simple as taking the time to write letters home to loved ones to preserve mental stability and ward off homesickness. The main feature all of these tactics—and untold others—had in common is that they were designed to circumvent situations that common soldiers believed (sometimes erroneously, as Meier points out) caused diseases. Relative good health, in turn, helped buoy the morale of the armies.

While self-care is undoubtedly the main feature of *Nature's Civil War*, the first three chapters largely provide background information. These chapters detail how antebellum Americans practiced medicine at the household level and how medical knowledge of the day was discovered, disseminated, implemented, or rejected. Moreover, they provide a baseline for the state of scientific understanding concerning how and why diseases spread, while also outlining the establishment (or lack thereof) and dealings of official health bureaucracies for the Union and the Confederacy. Professional historians will find little new information here, but these sections constitute a useful primer for non-academics and do ultimately help Meier piece together the combination of factors that likely made self-care regiments attractive to some soldiers—although how many is still inconclusive.

Chapters 4 and 5 deliver the main payload of the book. "Becoming a Seasoned Soldier" contains the bulk of Meier's evidence for soldiers practicing self-care during the Peninsula and Valley campaigns. From numerous published memoirs, as well as letters and manuscript sources, Meier culls examples of men building beds, doing the laundry, moving camps to higher (and dryer) ground, learning to identify poisonous and medicinal plants indigenous to Virginia, and even draining entire campgrounds when time allowed. Meier also deals thoughtfully with cultural conflicts created by self-care. For example, while well-laundered clothing could help eradicate pests and prevent infection, men had to first overcome preconceived gender- and race-based notions about who normally performed such tasks and how it influenced masculinity.

Chapter 5 ("Straggling and the Limits of Self-Care") explores how most self-care strategies required soldiers to straggle—that is, to be absent from the ranks without a pass, but with the intention of returning—and how decisions made by commanders regarding the practice eventually tipped the risk-reward ratio away from self-care. Meier argues that self-care kept men healthier than official medical services provided by either army and that much of self-care relied upon le-

nient penalties for men caught straggling. In other words, the punitive price had to be worth the health-related reward. Commanders disagreed; they could not carry out their orders or wage campaigns if large swaths of their armies were inexplicably absent when needed. So officers on both sides, Meier asserts, cracked down on straggling after 1862 and inadvertently made their own fighting forces more prone to sickness and weakness. The logic behind these arguments is sound and prompts follow-up questions: Given their freedom of movement and access to home, did irregular combatants have, at least in theory, the best opportunities to undertake self-care? And to what extent did regular soldiers straggling to *temporarily* avoid combat because of health reasons (rather than cowardice or outright desertion) also constitute a form of extreme self-care or preservation?

Nature's Civil War makes several valuable contributions to our understanding of the common soldier. Meier illuminates how antebellum understandings of nature, medical science, and the body influenced the decisions of individual soldiers that, in turn, eventually forced sweeping policy changes from war departments and commanders. In the process, Meier also provides a much more sophisticated portrait of what men were doing in camp—where they spent far more time than in battle—and how many of the most important aspects of the soldier experience had very little to do with actions on the battlefield. Finally, the book also provides a timely makeover to the notion of a soldier's "seasoning" in which men were active agents in a struggle to harden themselves against the environment rather than simply waiting and hoping to survive and to achieve veteran status. These conclusions in hand, subsequent scholars should be ready to investigate how Meier's self-care paradigm may have functioned in other geographic areas and command districts.

For as much insight as the book yields, it leaves key issues unaddressed regarding the fundamental criterion of what actually constituted "self-care." Specifically, what actions taken by soldiers *wouldn't* qualify? A critical component of Meier's argument for the development of self-care techniques is the cause-and-effect relationship between knowledge and action. She holds that men intentionally observed the environment because "they believed their lives depended on acquiring such knowledge" (p. 36). With this in mind, did men have to be *consciously* executing strategies as part of a self-care program for them to truly practice self-care? As Meier concedes, not all veterans bought into and pursued self-care—but surely some of these dissenters still wrote letters home or enjoyed the protein infusion of a scavenged ham. At first glance, such queries may seem pedantic. Collectively, however, they raise a larger issue that must be accounted for: at what point do definitions of self-care practices become so vague that the term refers less to strategic actions than to what men simply did inherently or naturally?

Though Spartan in stretches, Meier's prose confirms more than ever how inextricably interwoven the battlefront and homefront really were as the war lurched through 1862 and beyond. For that reason, *Nature's Civil War* is recommended to historians and buffs alike. Additionally, the book's accessible size should lend itself to classroom discussion at the collegiate level.

Note

[1]. On the collision of soldiers, armies, and the environment, see Megan Kate Nelson, ***Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War*** (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012); and Lisa M. Brady, ***War Upon the Land: Military Strategy and the Transformation of Southern Landscapes during the Civil War*** (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012). For examples of cutting-edge work on Civil War medicine, physical disability, and psychological trauma, see Shauna Devine, ***Learning from the Wounded: The Civil War and the Rise of American Medical Science*** (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); and Bri-

an Craig Miller, ***Empty Sleeves: Amputation in the Civil War South*** (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015). And for a very recent study of soldiers' struggle to reintegrate themselves into civilian society see James Marten, ***Sing Not War: The Lives of Union and Confederate Veterans in Gilded Age America*** (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014)

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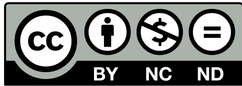

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