

The Struggle for the Life of the Republic: A Civil War Narrative by Brevet Major Charles Dana Miller, 76th Ohio Volunteer Infantry. Edited by Stewart Bennett and Barbara Tillery (Kent: The Kent State University Pres, 2004. xxiii, 301 pp. \$34.00, ISBN 0-87338-785 -6.)

Among the thousands of books stemming from the American Civil War, memoirs of soldiers, Union and Confederate, constitute an appreciable share. Given the accumulation of such books, perhaps publishers considering expending print and paper on another manuscript of personalia should weigh several questions: does it present a significant view of a battle or campaign, of leading military figures, of ordinary soldiers or of why men fight. Though hardly remarkable on any of these counts, *The Struggle for the Life of the Republic*, a reminiscent narrative of Charles Dana Miller, a soldier from Ohio, deserves publication primarily because of his description of camp life.

The editors, Barbara Tillery, a descendant of Miller and a desktop publisher, and Stewart Bennett, a historian, have given order to a narrative that Miller composed sometime between 1869 and 1881. Tillery, unfortunately, has written a baffling preface on the provenance of the narrative, at times referring to it as Miller's handscripted manuscript, at other times as a transcribed copy of the manuscript. Readers will find the narrative a primer on the mobility of regiments in the western theater, but Bennett goes too far in asserting that it is an "indispensable and sorely needed treasure trove of historical documentation of the Civil War (xxiii). It will not flutter the doves of Civil War historiography. Constructed years after the war and rather polished, Miller's prose lacks the spontaneity and rough-hewn language of a soldier in the field recording first-hand the tedium and terror of war. Thus the editors have been spared the task of cleaning up syntax. They have provided exhaustive and useful notes to the text.

Miller, born in Mt. Vernon, Ohio in 1836, was a grain merchant in Newark when he entered service in the 76th Ohio Volunteer Infantry in October of 1861 in answer to Abraham Lincoln's call for 500,000 volunteers. He saw his enlistment and later reenlistment as a commitment to the "Constitution, the Union and for human liberty" (80) and as a means to suppress a "wicked rebellion" leading to anarchy (72). He exemplified what James McPherson has noted in *For Cause and Comrades* (1997): a substantial majority of men who enlisted and reenlisted in the Union army did so out of a resolve to preserve the Union and to sustain their own honor (18-19, 168-169).

Appointed first sergeant of his company, Miller first recruited men for the 76th in central Ohio - - his account of the competition for recruits is interesting - - and then joined his company in the field. He rose to the captaincy of the company as the

regiment fought Confederates at Fort Donelson, Shiloh, Arkansas Post, the siege of Vicksburg and Sherman's march on Atlanta (he was on leave when unit of the regiment scaled Lookout Mountain). He recalled in conventional fashion the fighting, often recounting the tactics of a battle and occasionally depicting the evisceration of combat, but wrote in rich detail on camp life - - on the prevalence of disease there, the building of shelters - - "shebangs," the soldiers' privations, the boredom of routine, and the search for diversion - - men in his company played pranks of Jimmy Ring, a diminutive Irishman fond of whiskey and John Bollman, a black servant of an officer. Altogether, the 76th counted ninety-one men killed in combat or dying of wounds; another 271 died of disease or in accidents. Of about 123 Ohio infantry regiments organized in the first eighteen months of the war, the regiments that did most of the fighting in Ohio's name, the 76th ranked fifty-third in deaths in combat - - William Fox. *Regimental Losses in the American Civil War, 1861-1865*, (1898), 492ff.

Unlike Stephen Crane's Henry Fleming, Miller was not uncertain about his conduct in combat, about whether he would should the white feather He expressed no hint of fear. And he had no sympathy for men who acted as cowards, threatening on one occasion to shoot a man if he "stepped back one foot" in a fight (160). He admired officers whose bravery inspired soldiers to close with the enemy. At no point did he suggest that his men fought out of loyalty to each other, out of unit cohesion, the explanation that psychologists of combat often offer for the willingness of men to fight and die.

Miller had pronounced views on issues inherent in the war. He had only contempt for the Copperheads and their leader, Clement L. Vallandigham; home on leave because of the lingering effects of malaria, he found it "very painful" to witness a "Vallandigham convention" in Newark (133). On Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, he said nothing; but he approved the enlistment of Blacks in the Union army, asserting that the Rebels were making use of them "to cultivate the soil and raise supplies to feed their armies" and that "every body of negroes taken from them [the Rebels] was a blow against their material strength" (91).

Though rising to positions of authority - - late in the war he was appointed Acting Assistant Inspector General of a brigade in the 15th Army Corps - - Miller was no practitioner of chickenshit, the habitude of military men who, as Paul Fussell has described them in *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (1989), subjected underlings to petty harassment in the name of necessary discipline that had nothing to do with winning a war (80-81). Indeed, perhaps he was lax in assessing

damages against soldiers who destroyed governmental property. And he believed that a “warm attachment” existed between the men in his company and himself (198, 214). He was no egalitarian, though: assigned to the deck of a steam boat with enlisted men while officers lounged in comfortable cabins, he “felt the mortification of being forced below my social level” (14).

For his narrative, Miller had an objective similar to what Sergeant Berry Benson, a Confederate sharpshooter, had for his reminiscences; Benson hoped that they would “go down amongst his descendants for a long time.” Miller thought that “There may be, in the future, readers of these memoirs who will be interested in the history of that grand old Regiment” (229). With the publication of *The Struggle for the Republic*, perhaps that will happen.

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