

Conrad's Chapbook: Sacred Duty Drew An Artist Home From Old Rome'

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Review

CONRAD'S CHAPBOOK

Sacred duty drew an artist home from Old Rome'

Coski, John M.

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Bassham, Ben L. *Ten Months in the 'Orphan Brigade': Conrad Wise Chapman's Civil War Memoir.* Kent State University Press, ISBN 873386388

A wartime memoir by Conrad Wise Chapman, the most important soldier-artist of the Confederacy, represents a potential bounty for historians. Unfortunately, the memoir covers only one year and does not include Chapman's service in Virginia or in South Carolina, where he documented with paintings Charleston's harbor defenses. Kent State University art history professor Ben Bassham asserts in his introduction that Chapman's memoirs deserve publication because they are "such a good read" and "make for a powerful and unforgettable picture of the war drawn by a young man with an eye for detail."

Opinions will differ over whether the partial memoir makes for a good read, but no one can contest that it provides an invaluable window into the unique perspective of one Southern soldier. "My character was formed in the armies of the south," Chapman wrote in the memoir, "and for better or worse I must abide by it." Though born in Virginia, Chapman was at first an outsider among his comrades-in-arms. Known as "Old Rome" for his adopted home in Italy, Chapman aroused curiosity and suspicion. When he arrived in "neutral" Kentucky to join the Confederate army, an officer in his regiment (3rd Kentucky Infantry) even accused him of being a spy. The subsequent 10 months in the Orphan Brigade were not exactly rife with the events that customarily make for an exciting memoir. Sick in the hospital during February and March 1862, Chapman rejoined his unit in time to be wounded on the second day at Shiloh. The memoir ends abruptly in June 1862 with Chapman's unit on the march in northern Mississippi.

Written from memory more than three years after Chapman returned home to Rome on furlough, the memoir is most notable as the expression of the faith

and passions of a young man who went out of his way to join a cause from which he could have remained aloof. "We who are left, have a sacred duty to perform," Chapman interjected in his account of November 1861, "that is to keep [those who died] in remembrance and the wrongs to avenge which they died for, to be worthy of them."

The passage reveals not only Chapman's ideology, but also his often convoluted punctuation and grammar. Consistent with modern editing standards, Bassham presents Chapman's words without alteration and minimal annotation. On a few occasions, the prose is dense enough to lose the reader. The chronological and stylistic shortcomings of Chapman's memoir and its brevity and paucity of illustrations make it more a pamphlet than a book. The original manuscript of the memoir is in a private collection and, regardless of shortcomings, this book is a welcome contribution. Bassham himself proves the value of the source in his lavish and definitive biography, *Conrad Wise Chapman: Artist and Soldier of the Confederacy* (Kent State University Press, 1999).

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