

War In Watercolor: Draftsman's Diaries And Drawings Record Battles, Andersonville

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Review

WAR IN WATERCOLOR

Draftsman's diaries and drawings record battles, Andersonville

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Sneden, Robert Knox and Bryan, Charles F.. *Eye of the Storm: A Civil War Odyssey*. Free Press, 2000-10-01. ISBN 684863650

Among the soldier-artists who created a contemporary pictorial account of the Civil War, Robert Knox Sneden was almost certainly unique. With the publication of **Eye of the Storm**, an edited version of his illustrated wartime diary, Sneden should now be placed in the front ranks of Civil War artists.

Born in Nova Scotia, Sneden worked as an architectural and engineering draftsman in New York City before enlisting in the 40th New York Volunteers (the "Mozart Regiment") in the summer of 1861. Initially a quartermaster, Sneden was soon shifted to mapmaking, and did useful and sometimes dangerous duty in that capacity during the Peninsula campaign and at Second Bull Run.

With few exceptions, Sneden's duties were at first safe and relatively easy, but all that changed in November 1863, when he was captured by John Singleton Mosby near Brandy Station, Virginia. From that time until his exchange two years later, Sneden's war became a nightmare. Sent first to Richmond, he and his fellow prisoners-of-war were then transported by cattle car to a newly created prison called Andersonville. Sneden and his contingent were among the first of what would later swell to 33,000 Union prisoners jammed into the notorious Confederate stockade.

Throughout his service in Virginia and later in a succession of horrible Rebel prison camps, Sneden kept a diary and made the richly detailed drawings we would expect from an engineering draftsman. Like his prose, Sneden's images of buildings and terrain are precisely rendered, with an emphasis on clarity and completeness. He mailed the diary entries and drawings home

whenever possible; in prison, he hid them in his clothing and shoes. After the War, he rewrote and refined his wartime journals, fleshing them out with historical accounts taken from other sources, and coloring the drawings he had made in the field, perhaps with an eye toward publishing his own personal history.

The Virginia Historical Society acquired four albums of Sneden's drawings and maps in 1994, and later tracked down and purchased five more volumes containing nearly 5,000 pages of Sneden's diary and even more watercolors. From this mass of materials, editors Charles F. Bryan, Jr., and Nelson D. Lankford selected passages from the diaries to reconstruct a contemporary record (thereby rejecting the sections of text based on Sneden's secondary, postwar sources) and chose an appropriate number of colored illustrations.

This is quite simply a wonderful book. Sneden's vividly descriptive prose brings to life the messy, chaotic, and sometimes humorous stories of men at war. One can virtually hear the soldiers snoring and the mules braying. Something of a cynic, and a perfect example of the survivor who did what was necessary to get through the War, Sneden didn't leave us a rosy view of the conflict. Especially moving is his account of the horrible months he spent in Andersonville, a personal story calculated to ruin anyone's romantic reveries about the Civil War.

Sneden's all-observing eye was truly "in the storm," and his belatedly published memoir should soon become a standard in the field.

Ben L. Bassham, emeritus professor of art at Kent State University, is the author of Conrad Wise Chapman, Artist and Soldier of the Confederacy (1998), for which he recently won the first Henry Timrod Southern Culture Award. He also edited Chapman's Civil War memoir, Ten Months in the "Orphan Brigade" (1999).