

Silver Lining: Artist-Soldier's Drawings Panned Out For Him And Posterity

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Review

SILVER LINING

Artist-soldier's drawings panned out for him and posterity

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Campbell, Eric A. *A Grand Terrible Drama From Gettysburg to Petersburg: The Civil War Letters of Charles Wellington Reed.* Fordham University Press, 2000-10-01. ISBN 823219712

Students of history should always welcome the publication of letters and diaries, and praise the editors and publishers who make these primary sources available. The letters of Private Charles Reed, 9th Massachusetts (Bigelow's) Battery, which are collected in "**A Grand Terrible Drama**," are not exactly a hidden treasure of information on life in the Army of the Potomac. But, as Reed himself would confess, it is not his letters that deserve top billing. Editor Eric A. Campbell, a ranger-historian at Gettysburg National Military Park, understates his case when he points out that Reed's 250 drawings of camp life and campaigning are an integral part of the narrative and that Reed has been neglected inexplicably as an artistic chronicler of the war.

Reed was a soldier-artist whose wartime "sketches" (as he dubbed them) appeared in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* and were featured in his comrade John D. Billings's classic work *Hardtack and Coffee*. In fact, considering that Reed's artistic renderings were sold as lithographs during the war, it might be more accurate to describe the young bugler as an artist-soldier, for he seemed to devote more attention and energy to depicting soldiering than to actually doing it. In November 1864, Reed's avocation won him a position as assistant topographical engineer, and he spent the rest of the war sketching for the army and for himself.

The early letters found in this selection reveal a man who was obsessed with obtaining proper sketchbooks and pencils, executing sketches for the captain, and sending full books home to his mother. During the last two years, Reed turned entrepreneur with a vengeance. Unfortunately, his subject-the

war-became a hindrance to his chosen profession. "I can do nothing about them [plates of a review] until this affair is over," he wrote his mother on May 13, 1864 from Spotsylvania. He spent much of the Petersburg campaign wandering the camps "collecting my dues" for several lithographs, including a famous topographical map of the Gettysburg battlefield. "I am going to make some money out of this," he wrote his mother in March 1865. Indeed, he sometimes sent home as much as \$200 at a time.

Important as the illustrations are, Campbell understandably trumpets the significance of Reed's accounts of Gettysburg (his first battle), though Reed failed to recount his dramatic battlefield rescue of battery commander John Bigelow-the incident for which he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor 30 years after the war. He was more lavish in his descriptions of muddy winter encampments around Washington, Brandy Station, and Petersburg, and of the army's movements during the 1864 Overland campaign.

But creating and selling his drawings clearly defined Reed's wartime experience and appropriately dominate this book. It is, therefore, unfortunate that editor and publisher did not treat the book as a catalogue, and offer dimensions of original works, notes on which works were published previously, and at least occasional full-page plates.

John M. Coski is historian and library director of the Museum of the Confederacy. Contrary to an erroneous listing in CWBR's June/July 2000 issue, he does not believe that Harry Turtledove's novel, The Guns of the South, is the work that has most transformed scholarship.