

The Civil War Soldier: A Historical Reader

Charles R. Bowery Jr.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Bowery, Charles R. Jr. (2003) "The Civil War Soldier: A Historical Reader," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 5 : Iss. 2 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol5/iss2/6>

Review

Bowery Jr., Charles R.

Spring 2003

Barton , Michael and Logue, Larry M. *The Civil War Soldier: A Historical Reader*. New York University Press, \$24.95 ISBN 814798802

Soldier's story

Comprehensive anthology features seminal scholarship

The Civil War enthusiast interested in delving into the existing scholarship on the war's common soldiers can be forgiven for feeling overwhelmed. Since Bell Irvin Wiley published *Life of Johnny Reb* in 1943 and *Life of Billy Yank* in 1952, seminal works that essentially initiated the modern study of the Civil War soldier, a veritable flood of primary and secondary works has poured forth. Barton and Logue, professors at Penn State and Mississippi College, respectively, have made an overdue contribution to the field: a comprehensive collection of scholarship on Civil War soldiers North and South. This book complements *Not the General But the Soldier*, a 1998 essay by Reid Mitchell (found in McPherson and Cooper, eds., *Writing the Civil War: the Quest to Understand*) that is more a survey of historiography than an attempt to synthesize existing scholarship or to offer new interpretations.

Barton and Logue certainly had no shortage of material from which to choose, and they have done an excellent job in selecting important contributions from the brightest lights in the field. For all of his contributions to our understanding of our soldier forebears, Wiley's works were based on a fairly limited number of accounts, and were certainly reflective of the political and social movements of World War II and the Cold War era, a period in which national unity was of paramount concern. These considerations led Wiley to downplay the differences and shortcomings of the men in blue and gray, and to emphasize the features that made them similar. This anthology does not refute Wiley's findings; rather, it adds depth and breadth to the works of the old master.

The pieces comprising **The Civil War Soldier** fall into five broad categories, and embrace a number of different methodologies. Part One attempts to determine who these men (and women!) were who took up arms in 1861 by using a standard framework. The section begins with a selection by Bell Wiley, and continues with other pieces on related subjects. Essays by Maris Vinovskis and editor Logue use the techniques of demographic analysis to determine as clearly as possible the social, economic, and political backgrounds of soldiers in Newburyport, Massachusetts, and in the river counties of Mississippi. Further, an understanding of who *did not* willingly sign on to fight offers an additional illumination of Civil War America. James W. Geary provides this perspective in an essay on northern conscripts and evaders from *We Need Men*, his landmark study of Federal conscription efforts. Elizabeth Leonard of Colby College rounds out this section with an examination of those Union and Confederate women who attempted to take up arms with their male counterparts.

Parts Two and Three examine the physical world of Civil War soldiers, on the march, in camp, and in combat. Part Two begins with a selection on life on the march by Confederate artilleryman Carlton McCarthy. McCarthy's piece is one of two firsthand accounts in the book, and should interest readers enough to pursue additional published primary sources. This account would also fit appropriately into a different anthology, organized similarly but drawn from the words and thoughts of the soldiers themselves. James I. Robertson of Virginia Tech, a former Wiley student and in many ways his intellectual successor, contributes an essay on the camp diversions of Yankees and Rebels. This part concludes with an essay on Union soldier life by Fred A. Shannon, a predecessor of Bell Wiley.

Part Three, the book's longest with seven selections, focuses on the experience of combat. In *The Negro as Soldier*, the book's other firsthand account, white Union officer Thomas Wentworth Higginson offers his thoughts on the black soldiers he led. Part Three also contains extracts from two of the more controversial works on Civil War soldiering. In *The Rebels are Barbarians*, the concluding chapter of Grady McWhiney and Perry D. Jamieson's *Attack and Die*, the authors speculate that southerners fought (and, in the end, lost) with a predilection for frontal assaults because of their Celtic heritage. This highly questionable but thought-provoking thesis should encourage the reader to delve into the rest of *Attack and Die*, a fine investigation of Civil War tactics and combat. Englishman Paddy Griffith offers his perspective on infantry combat in a chapter from his 1989 *Battle Tactics of the Civil War*, speculating that the

imperfect training and command and control of Civil War units, rather than advances in weapons technology, contributed to the indecisive nature of Civil War battles. The McWhiney/Jamieson and Griffith theses are necessary starting points for any discussion of Civil War combat, the defining experience for any soldier. They highlight the essential and continuing vitality of the study of our national tragedy.

Parts Four, How Soldiers Felt, and Five, What Soldiers Believed, focus on the internal lives of Civil War soldiers, and again highlight some central themes and arguments. Chief among these is the debate over the primary motivations of Civil War soldiers to enlist, to endure hardship, and eventually to face the trial of combat. Gerald Linderman asserts that Civil War soldiers served out of the overriding need to prove their courage to their comrades, most of whom were relatives or prewar friends. In almost direct opposition to this view, Princeton University professor James M. McPherson's exhaustive research into soldier letters and diaries led him to conclude that Civil War soldiers wrote of duty, loyalty, and patriotism not merely because of Victorian conventions, but because these ideas formed the tangible basis for their motivation to serve and fight. While motivations must have varied from person to person and from place to place, any critical investigation of soldier motivation must begin with Linderman and McPherson. Here again, Barton and Logue have done the Civil War enthusiast or budding scholar an invaluable service in combining these ideas in one place.

The Civil War Soldier is an important work. An anthology of over fifty years of research and scholarship on Union and Confederate soldiers, it surely deserves a place in the collection of any student of the war. Suitable for both the expert and the general reader, its concise organization and summary of important schools of thought make it useful as a graduate or undergraduate text as well.

Charles R. Bowery Jr. is a United States Army officer and military history instructor at West Point. He is available at charles.bowery@usma.edu.