Southern Sons, Northern Soldiers: The Civil War Letters of the Remley Brothers, 22nd Iowa Infantry

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Review

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No whistling Dixie

Fighting and dying for the Union

*Southern Sons, Northern Soldiers* brings together a valuable collection of letters from two observant and literate volunteers. The volume's merit rests on the incisiveness of the Remleys' observations, but their background enriches the collection still more. Openly opposed to slavery, the patriarch of the Remley clan had moved his family from western Virginia to Iowa in 1855. The brothers whose writings form the core of this collection, Lycurgus and George, lived outside Iowa City, from their mid-teens until their enlistment. The volume consists of the correspondence between the brothers and their parents as well as letters to and from other siblings and relatives. The editor, Julie Holcomb, is to be commended for bringing such a rich collection to the public eye. Although a map of the Remleys' travels would have aided the reading, Holcomb provides helpful notes and a good index that make the volume accessible and useful to both lay readers and scholars.

The volume provides a wealth of material for those people interested in the social history of Union soldiers. The correspondents wrote regularly in 1862 and 1863, and that consistency allows the reader to understand what the soldiers knew about their families' lives and what their own concerns were. Unlike those fighting in wars abroad, Civil War soldiers stayed intimately connected and close to their homes. The Remleys were fortunate in this regard since they fought mostly in the West as well as lived there, but the nature of their relationships with friends and family were more typical than not. Civil War armies were not isolated institutions. Both Lycurgus and George followed local events closely, soliciting and comments on news about neighbors, business, and politics. The
concrete attachment to home that the Remleys maintained bolstered their commitment to preserving the Union that they knew and loved. Both Lycurgus and George manifested their loyalty through actions and through their efforts to generate public support for continued resistance to the Confederacy's bid for independence. Their anger at deserters and condemnations of those in the North unwilling to fight, which surface at several points in their letters, reflect the central role played by soldiers in supporting the war. As much as the voters back home, soldiers helped mobilize public opinion on behalf of Lincoln and his war plans.

The brothers also offer insights into the intellectual dimensions of their service. For both men, a deep commitment to Christianity helped mitigate the horrors of war and the uncertainty of what lay ahead. After his brother died a slow and undoubtedly painful death from dysentery, George rested sure in the knowledge that Lycurgus had moved on to a better world. Late in the war, George again took solace that from knowing that God would ensure that all will come out right in the end. This deep faith may help explain why the Remleys gave relatively little explicit attention to the question of why they were serving as Northern soldiers. Born and raised for over a decade in Virginia, the fact that these men volunteered to defend the Union represents a deep commitment to a political vision of the nation at odds with their old neighbors. The brevity of their direct remarks on motivation speaks to the steadfastness of their vision of the Union. When the brothers commented on why they fought, they adopted the shorthand common to most Civil War soldiers in which they assumed that their readers already understood the reason for their service in the war. And, upon the whole, Lycurgus noted casually in late 1862, I don't see how we could better spend our lives than in endeavoring to preserve our government and institutions.

**Southern Sons, Northern Soldiers** also provides valuable answers to other important questions about the war. George gives a detailed chronicle of his regiment's movement through the Vicksburg campaign from the crossing and fight Port Gibson all the way through to Vicksburg's surrender on July 4. For those interested in the Vicksburg campaign, this narrative provides a clear ground-level view of Union actions. The brothers also prove to be a valuable source for information about interactions between Union soldiers and southern civilians and on the southern homefront in general. Providing good evidence that a hard war began early, Lycurgus reported with regret that soldiers had seized food and property from Union and Confederate civilians alike during parts of their march through southern Missouri. Similar problems manifested themselves
during George's time in Louisiana and Texas in 1863-1864. Regarding the latter, George concluded that Unionists who greeted the troops warmly only to have their property seized for military necessity probably cursed the day the Yankees came. His observation reveals volumes about the difficulties that war-time policies created for postwar Reconstruction plans. In this observation, as throughout the collection, George reveals the tension between his religious beliefs and the necessities of war û the frankness with which he explores these moments make this collection an important addition to the literature on the Civil War.

Aaron Sheehan-Dean is an assistant professor of history at the University of North Florida. He is working on a manuscript titled The Family War: Motivation and Commitment in the American Civil War.