

The Telegraph Goes to War: The Personal Diary of David Homer Bates, Lincoln's Telegraph Operator

John Beeler

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

Recommended Citation

Beeler, John (2004) "The Telegraph Goes to War: The Personal Diary of David Homer Bates, Lincoln's Telegraph Operator," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 4 , Article 27.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol6/iss4/27>

Review

Beeler, John

Fall 2004

Bates, David Homer and Markle, Donald E., Editor. *The Telegraph Goes to War: The Personal Diary of David Homer Bates, Lincoln's Telegraph Operator.* Edmonston Publishing Inc., \$27.95 ISBN 1892059029

Modern technology

The White House connection

At first glance this appears to be a book with no clear *raison d'etre*, other than being about the Civil War, a subject of such endless fascination to American readers that, as one current historical authority has put it, no book on the topic is so bad that it cannot be published. The volume under review here certainly does not fall into that category, but, on first viewing, might be likened to the literary equivalent of carrying coals to Newcastle. In 1907, the diary's author published his memoir as Lincoln in the Telegraph Office: Recollections of the United States Military Telegraph Corps during the Civil War and, lest any reader have difficulty locating the original, was re-published in 1995 by the University of Nebraska Press, and is even available online as an ebook at netLibrary (<http://www.netlibrary.com/EbookDetails.aspx>). What need, therefore, of an edition of the diary on which much of the information in the memoir was based?

This impression is initially reinforced by the book's structure, which is built around the only portion of the diary—covering the period November 1863 to June 1865—known to have survived. The earliest entries, therefore, relate principally to operations in East Tennessee, but once beyond these, one quickly reaches the doldrums of early 1864, when military activity on both sides was at a low ebb and Bates often recorded little more than the state of the weather and the status of his personal health. The persevering reader, however, will ultimately find much of interest and value in both Bates's take on the war and Donald Markle's introductory material.

Most obviously, Bates's entries from May 1864 through the war's end clearly illustrate both the centrality of telegraphic communications to Grant's strategy, and reminds us, in a manner that histories dealing with individual theaters in compartmentalized fashion cannot, that these campaigns were unfolding simultaneously. His entry for 15 May, 1864, to choose a single example at random, records the latest news on Sheridan's cavalry raid into the Army of Northern Virginia's rear, operations in Benjamin Butler's department near Fort Darling, the Army of the Potomac's dispositions at Spotsylvania Courthouse, and Sherman's latest dispatch from Resaca, Georgia. Other entries record goings-on in the Valley and the West along with those in eastern Virginia and the Deep South. The diary thus enables one to see the last phase of the war as a whole, rather than as geographically-isolated pieces, and reminds us that this grand strategy would have been impossible to implement without the rapidity of communications afforded by the telegraph.

The latter point is even more forcefully driven home by the sequence of telegrams received during the final chase which ended at Appomattox: on April 5 Grant telegraphed from Wilson station, 27 miles west of Petersburg; on the 6th the line had reached Jetersville (close to 40 miles from Petersburg), on the 8th Farmville (more than 50 miles), and on the 9th Gen. Grant telegraphed from Appomattox near Lynchburg [and almost 80 miles in a direct line from Petersburg] that Genl. Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Va. to him today. The telegraph advanced as fast as did the army whose operations it recorded.

Another noteworthy activity undertaken by Bates and his colleagues at the Telegraph Office was deciphering intercepted Confederate missives. Thus in December 1863 Bates was instrumental in cracking a series of exchanges between Confederate Secretary of the Treasury Judah P. Benjamin, Senator Benjamin Hill, and Southern agents in New York that resulted in the seizure of several million dollars worth of Confederate bonds & a large amount of Confederate 20's and 50's that had been printed by a firm in that city. This incident, along with one in which a bogus proclamation was printed in two New York newspapers to drive up the price of gold for the benefit of speculators, and an attempt by one of his own colleagues to bribe Bates for similar purposes amply illustrate that, as in other wars, there was no column for patriotism or honor in the balance book of American capitalism during the Civil War. Thus should we be doubly grateful for the existence of honorable public servants like Bates and Ulysses S. Grant.

Editor Markle is to be congratulated for a well-produced volume. The diary is divided into two to three month sections, each preceded by a brief introduction that provides useful contextual material for the information recorded by Bates. A larger, formal introduction furnishes biographical information on Bates himself, and one of the two appendices gives short explanations and examples of the cipher systems most commonly used by the Union and the Confederacy. Several illustrations also enliven the text.

This reader found two grounds for criticism, one major, the other minor. First, this diary, like most printed primary sources, stands or falls with the quality and accessibility of the annotation, without which all but the best-known personal and place names will be meaningless to most readers. Markle's annotation is for the most part comprehensive, but either he or the publishers unwisely chose to place it at the end of each section, rather than footnotes, necessitating almost constant flipping back and forth between text and endnotes. Surely, given the sophistication of today's layout and publishing software, it can be no more difficult and costly to use footnotes and thus spare readers the irritation and waste of time involved in consulting endnotes? Finally, the phrase revolution in military affairs, employed by Benjamin F. Cooling in the forward, is now so hackneyed and clichéd that an immediate and permanent moratorium on its use should be declared.

These blemishes, it should be stressed, diminish neither the historical value of the diary nor the utility of Markle's introductory material and annotation. In sum, therefore, rather than being a volume with no apparent *raison d'etre*, it can be viewed as a valuable supplement to Bates's memoirs.

John Beeler is a professor of history at the University of Alabama, and has written and edited works on navies and technological change in the mid and late 19th century.