

Yours for the Union: The Civil War Letters of John W. Chase, First Massachusetts Light Artillery

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Review

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Collier, John S., Editor and Collier, Bonnie B., Editor. *Yours for the Union: The Civil War Letters of John W. Chase, First Massachusetts Light Artillery.* Fordham University Press, \$55.00 ISBN 83223035

Anti-abolitionist Yankee

Artilleryman was for the Union, but not slaves

Collections of letters are always a welcome addition to the world of Civil War books. They give scholars ready access to valuable primary sources, and they give the interested lay reader a you-are-there view on this most studied of American wars. **Yours for the Union: The Civil War Letters of John W. Chase, First Massachusetts Light Artillery** departs in two ways from the typical book of this sort. First, it offers the point of view of an artilleryman rather than an infantryman. Second, Chase was no friend of the abolitionists. To the contrary, he believed throughout his service that the war's aims should focus only on the Union, not on emancipation.

Chase was an old man by army standards when the war broke out. An experienced carpenter in Roxbury, Massachusetts, Chase was 36 and the widowed father of four. He had never liked his work, though, and that, as well as his strong commitment to maintaining the Union, drove him to volunteer to be a private in August 1861. He gradually rose to the rank of sergeant and went on to participate in many of the major battles of the war: the Seven Days' Battle, Antietam, Fredericksburg, Gettysburg, the Wilderness, Cold Harbor, and Petersburg. Although he entertained some thoughts of staying in the army--which he liked even though he grouched constantly (as soldiers will) about the food, the clothing, the officers, and the discomfort--he mustered out less than three weeks after the end of the war.

Despite the impressive amount of fighting that Chase was involved in, he rarely described it. He told his brother that he did not have the abilities to depict

the battles, and the rare occasion that he tried generally proved him right. The one exception is his story of the third day at Gettysburg, which is gripping. The Confederate artillery fire that morning, designed to soften the field for Pickett's charge, was the heaviest I ever heard, he wrote. When his battery was ordered to an area left of the cemetery, they met the wounded streaming off the field. On page 266, Chase writes, They told us Go in boys you will find it one of the hottest places you ever got into but said they We are giving them H____. (The editors chose not to clean up Chase's grammatical or spelling deficiencies unless they lead to confusion .) Once in place, they were ordered to lie down and wait. When the rebels appeared, though, his unit remained almost quiet. They fired just one gun, and that merely to get the range. That left Chase fairly free to witness the slaughter, as on page 268, a sight that even the most blood thirsty might shudder at.

What makes this book interesting is not its accounts of battles, but Chase's unrelenting antipathy toward African Americans and abolitionist politicians. Chase clearly entered the war with a low opinion of blacks, and his exposure to slaves and contrabands did nothing to improve his opinion. I think this Govt better take care of the men that are trying to fight the battles for them and let niggers go to the devil for I believe they have done us more damage in crossing and recrossing our lines than they ever done us good, he writes on pages 107 and 108. He blamed the Republicans for what he considered a misguided policy. I believe the damn Politicians are willing the country and the army may go to the devil if they can only carry out there party schemes, he says on page 114. His frustrations were further aggravated when his hero, George B. McClellan, was released from command. As late as 1864, Chase believed that the critical difference between Grant and Little Mac was the amount of support each received from the powers that be. If McClellan had been fairly dealt with, the Army of the Potomac could have taken Richmond in 1862, he posits on page 345. By the time he wrote that, though, he had become more discreet in publicly stating his thoughts because, he told his brother, he might be thought a Copperhead if people knew his opinions. (Copperheads were antiwar Democrats, and many in the army regarded them as traitors.) Nevertheless, he grudgingly admired Grant and plainly enjoyed his time serving under Sheridan.

Despite his many complaints and his increasing physical discomfort after spending years marching and sleeping in all kinds of conditions, Chase remained fiercely devoted to the cause of Union. Even during the summer of 1864, when the Union army appeared to be on the ropes, a weary and aching Chase said he

would happily surrender his life if it meant his country would be whole again. His was the kind of commitment that James M. McPherson described as typical of the Union volunteer in *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War*.

The one criticism of this book has to do with its editing. John Collier is a descendant of Chase, and Bonnie Collier is his wife. While they do a nice job handling the content of the letters, they do far too little to explain the context. Unless one knows the dates of particular fights or precise locations (Chase generally noted where he was at the top of his letters), it is difficult to know which battle Chase was fighting or how that battle fit into the larger picture of the war. Reading this, then, could be a rather frustrating experience for an interested general reader. For those with grounding in the war, however, **Yours for the Union** adds another valuable voice to the chorus.

Jennifer L. Weber is a lecturer at Princeton University, where she also received her doctorate. She is currently working on a book about dissent in the North during the Civil War. She has reviewed books for Civil War History, the New-York Journal of American History, the Journal of Southern History, and North and South, among others.