

Mountaineers in Gray: The Nineteenth Tennessee Volunteer Infantry Regiment, C.S.A.

Gordon B. McKinney

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

Recommended Citation

McKinney, Gordon B. (2005) "Mountaineers in Gray: The Nineteenth Tennessee Volunteer Infantry Regiment, C.S.A.," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 7 : Iss. 3 .
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol7/iss3/19>

Review

McKinney, Gordon B.

Summer 2005

Fowler, John D. *Mountaineers in Gray: The Nineteenth Tennessee Volunteer Infantry Regiment, C.S.A.*. University of Tennessee Press, \$34.00 hardcover ISBN 1572333146

Rebels of east Tennessee

Confederates were a minority in the region

Professor John D. Fowler of Kennesaw State University has written an exemplary regimental history. Fowler has provided the broader context that is absolutely essential to the understanding of this military group, and he has accomplished this difficult feat by examining virtually all of the sources available on the Civil War in East Tennessee--both print and manuscript. In addition, he has examined all of the recent secondary literature and incorporated or engaged all of it in his text and notes. This latter accomplishment is especially important since he is working in two fields--Civil War History and Appalachian Studies.

In his first two chapters, the author carefully provides the reader with the local historical context for his study. Using the work of Jonathan Atkins, David Hsiung, and Robert Tracy McKenzie, Fowler draws a careful portrait of East Tennessee in the antebellum period. In a series of succinct descriptions, he describes the strong Whig political tradition, relative geographical isolation, and relative absence of slavery in the mountain counties of the volunteer state. He then describes the secession movement and referenda of 1861 that confirmed the Unionists of East Tennessee as a minority in their state and the Confederates of East Tennessee as a minority in their region.

In a very impressive second chapter, Fowler then tries to identify those persons who chose to support the Confederacy--some of whom became members of the 19th Regiment. Drawing upon the excellent work done on this topic by Kenneth Noe, Noel Fisher, and Todd Groce, Fowler paints a convincing picture

of these rebels. They had several salient characteristics. First, they were almost always Democrats from the few counties where the party was strong in the region. In addition, they were men who lived in commercial centers and along rail lines that led further south. Finally, they were usually quite young--on occasion, the son of a man who still supported the national Union. Like many of their contemporaries, they entered the service as volunteers and expected that their service would be for only a few months, a year at the most.

In a series of five chapters, Fowler traces the military history of the regiment in chronological order--From Knoxville to Shiloh, from Corinth to Stones River, the Chickmauga and Chattanooga Campaigns, the Atlanta Campaign, Nashville and surrender under Johnston. The clear narrative in these chapters is supplemented by 24 excellent maps. In each case, the map that is presented was previously published in a more specialized study. This strategy strikes me as particularly enlightened, because it ensures both accuracy and relevance. Fowler is careful to provide a detailed picture of camp life and the personalities of officers and common soldiers that allows the reader to understand why the regiment persisted in the face of extraordinary hardships. The author also makes it abundantly clear why a significant number of individuals deserted the regiment and thereby greatly weakened it.

In reconstructing the many bloody fields that the 19th Regiment fought on, Fowler makes judicious decisions about the quality of leadership provided the soldiers. Generally, company officers appeared to be competent and popular with the men. Fowler provides numerous instances of personal bravery and inspired leadership at this level. The regimental leadership was not as consistent, but the colonels were usually adequate to the task. One of the most significant contributions that the author makes is to explain in detail how the failures and disputatious nature of the leadership at the brigade, corps, and army levels sapped the strength of the Army of Tennessee. Most Civil War enthusiasts and scholars are well aware of Braxton Bragg's and his immediate subordinates' dismal reputation for teamwork and harmony. Fowler's book documents the devastating impact that this infighting had on the morale of the troops in the field. He makes it clear that the damage done to the Army was not simply opportunities missed at Chickamauga--or later at Spring Hill--but also included the enervating loss of morale that led to the disaster at Missionary Ridge and constant flow of deserters back into the mountains.

Fowler also documents the devastating impact that new military technology had on troop strength. Starting with the Battle of Shiloh, the 19th Tennessee lost hundreds of members to disease, battlefield death, and wounds. By the midpoint of the war, the Regiment had lost 80 percent of its strength and was never able to rise above that level for the remainder of the war. Regimental leaders were active recruiters, but the reality of the battlefield and the minority status of Confederates in East Tennessee made replenishing the ranks a difficult chore at best. This reality led to the Regiment being combined with others in the later battles although it was able to sustain its identity to the surrender to Sherman's host in North Carolina.

Fowler concludes his interesting account with a final chapter that traces the fate of the survivors in the years after the war. On page 195, the author concludes the veterans of the Nineteenth who remained in Tennessee were on average substantially poorer in 1870 than before the war. More than 100 survivors applied for state Confederate pensions and many of them were living in extreme poverty. A few members of the elite who joined the regiment managed to recover and assume prominent roles in public life. But unlike former Confederates in the remainder of the South, they were limited in the appeals they could make based on their war service.

Although this volume appears to be limited in scope, it is, in fact, a major contribution to our understanding of the Civil War and Appalachia. By focusing on a specific unit, Fowler is able to test a number of broader themes that have emerged in recent historiography, and he does this with considerable success. We have another study to confirm that the war in Appalachia was a complex affair that needs continuing analysis. Fowler has also demonstrated that we need more unit histories to supplement the descriptions of battles and biographies of leaders if we are going to understand the full military history of the war. Finally, we need these local studies to provide us with the context that allows us to understand the motivation of the soldiers who faced appalling odds for survival and still fought for their cause.

Gordon McKinney is Professor of History and Director of the Appalachian Center at Berea College. He is co-author--with John C. Inscoe--of The Heart of Confederate Appalachia: Western North Carolina and the Civil War (2000) and author of Zeb Vance: North Carolina's Civil War Governor and Gilded Age Political Leader (2004).