

CIVIL WAR SESQUICENTENNIAL : Union Soldiers' Motivations

Chandra Manning

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Feature Essay

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Manning, Chandra *CIVIL WAR SESQUICENTENNIAL : Union Soldiers' Motivations.*

State of the Field: Where are Union Soldiers Now, and Where in the World Should they Go Next?

“Who wouldn’t be a soldier?” joked many new Union Army recruits when they wrote home to complain about the bad food and boring drill exercises that characterized their first weeks of service. Sometimes the question, “Who wouldn’t be a *historian* of soldiers,” seems just as apt, so often do books about the rank-and-file pour from the presses. It has not always been so. Civil War soldiers worried that they would be forgotten, and for many years historiography seemed to fulfill their expectations. Yet since the mid-twentieth century, and especially since the 1980s, interest in the common Union soldier has burgeoned into something of a cottage industry boasting things like anthologies and websites (for instance, soldierstudies.org) along with monographs. In the past two decades, the field has also grown far more attentive to the fact that ten percent of the Union Army consisted of African-American soldiers, and so if we are to talk about the men in blue, we also mean the black men in blue. In this enriched environment, the field has moved beyond descriptive narrative, and even beyond earlier historiographical skirmishes over whether ideology mattered to soldiers, to center on the content and influence of Union soldiers’ ideology. We are now less likely to argue about whether or not Union soldiers thought, and more likely to argue about what they thought about, and why it mattered –to the Army, to the War, to their home communities, and to U.S. history more generally. More than anything else, historians’ recognition of what Union soldiers can tell us about broad questions like emancipation and the troubled meaning of freedom, the role of the State, race, gender, politics, the growing international role of the United States, and religion accounts for the thriving health of Union soldier studies.

It would be heretical to survey of the field of soldier studies without talking about Bell Wiley, and for good reason. For the four-score years following the war, serious history paid scant attention to anyone other than high-ranking officers, until Wiley's *The Life of Johnny Reb* (1943) and later companion volume, *The Life of Billy Yank* (1952), brought to light the experiences and daily lives of enlisted men. Wiley's work is therefore descriptive, and on those grounds unlikely to be surpassed. It is hard to imagine anyone ever being able to tell us more about what Union soldiers ate and wore, what their shelter looked like, what songs they sang, and how they amused themselves in camp. Chances are, if anyone tries, the result will not extend beyond niggling detail and minutiae that does little to alter the way we think about the rank-and-file Union soldier, the war he fought, the world he came from, or the world his war helped to bring about.

So rich was Wiley's description of jokes, pranks, songs, food, and clothing, that no space remained for consideration of what –or if–Billy Yank actually thought. The political climate in the United States during the Cold War and especially in the wake of the disillusioning national experience of the Vietnam War led the next generation of historians, most influentially Gerald Linderman in his milestone book *Embattled Courage* (1987), to argue that Civil War soldiers were neither motivated by nor even aware of ideological factors. Yet even as the non-ideological school peaked with Linderman's work, the influence of the Civil Rights Movement and the "New Social History," with its emphasis on non-elite agency, was making inroads; several important works, ranging from Reid Mitchell's *Civil War Soldiers* (1988) about soldiers' values, to James McPherson's *For Cause and Comrades* (1998) about soldiers' ideology, trained attention on soldiers' motivations and ideas. By the 1990s, what Joseph Glatthaar called the "New Military History" was in full flower, fostering numerous books on how the contents of soldiers' minds made them active participants in shaping the war, my favorite of which remains Glatthaar's own *The March to the Sea and Beyond* (1995) about the enlisted men in Sherman's Army. Now, by and large, "Historians of soldiers begin from the assumption that soldiers are real historical actors who have the potential to shape, not simply respond to, their environment," as Aaron Sheehan-Dean expresses the point in his introduction to his useful 2006 anthology, *The View From the Ground: Experiences of Civil War Soldiers*.

But *what* did these actors think, and what difference did it make to the war, and to broader questions in U.S. history? It is on these questions that much work

currently focuses. The “all for the Union” take on soldiers’ worldviews still surfaces now and again, most recently in Gary Gallagher’s *The Union War* (2011), but more work takes seriously what soldiers black and white thought about slavery, race, and emancipation. My own *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (2007) wrestled with what soldiers thought about slavery, how they envisioned the relationship between slavery and the war, and how the war forced changes in soldiers’ ideas about slavery and race. Subsequent works continue to refine those questions with attention to specific times and places. Glenn Brasher’s *The Peninsula Campaign and the Necessity of Emancipation: African Americans and the Fight for Freedom* (2012), for example, focuses on how the actions of Virginia slaves and Army of the Potomac soldiers’ interactions with black people in Virginia directly influenced how the Peninsula Campaign was actually fought, and how Union war policy shifted after that campaign.

The centrality of gender to Union soldiers’ experiences has inspired study since Reid Mitchell’s pathbreaking *Civil War Soldiers* (1988) and *The Vacant Chair* (1995). Works like Nina Silber’s *Gender and the Sectional Conflict* (2009) continue to explore how women’s and men’s, including soldiers, understandings of what it meant to be a woman or a man affected what they did during the war, and in turn, got called into question by the war. In fact, the theme of gender has been anything but neglected lately, but it is a rich seam that continues to be mined with ever more precision like that displayed in Lorien Foote’s exploration of the war and differing northern understandings of what manhood meant, *The Gentlemen and the Roughs: Manhood, Honor and Violence in the Union Army* (2010).

Increased attention to immigrant soldiers is also enriching the field in ways that go beyond gap-filling. Christian Samito’s *Becoming American Under Fire: Irish Americans, African Americans, and the Politics of Citizenship During the Civil War*, for example, links questions of soldiers’ experiences, thoughts, and aspirations directly to important questions about how the Civil War changed both the scope of and Americans’ expectations regarding the central state. Most existing works on immigrant soldiers consider the impact of the war on immigrant soldiers’ ethnic identities and identities as Americans, but signs are percolating, in the form of journal articles and conference papers, that historians (especially of German soldiers) are beginning to see immigrant soldiers as a way of investigating Union soldiers in international and transnational context. That development is especially encouraging, because one way in which the study of

Civil War soldiers remains a bit out of step with U.S. historiography at large is soldier studies' relative inattention to international questions and transnational contexts. Locating Billy Yank in relation to the rest of the world (not just the North or the U.S.) promises to teach us much.

Soldiers and religion is clearly emerging as a growth field. Stephen Woodworth's *While God is Marching On* (2001) is largely descriptive, but new work, again largely in essay, article, and conference paper form, is beginning to grapple with the particular challenges presented by Union soldiers and religion. Specifically, the importance of religion to soldiers' lives and worlds is undeniable, but it is also deeply interior and personal. An older but still valuable work, Gardiner Shattuck's *A Shield and a Hiding Place* (1987) probes the significance of faith to Union Army morale and is able to make a broad argument about religion's impact, but sometimes at the expense of careful and sensitive examination of what religion meant to individuals. Kent Dollar's *Soldiers of the Cross: Confederate Christian-Soldiers and the Impact of the War on Their Faith* (2006) handles the deeply personal nature of religion by looking very closely at a handful of Confederate soldiers, and perhaps a similar treatment of Union soldiers could yield beneficial results, but the results would still not be generalizable beyond the small number of men studied. Historians of Union soldiers have not yet found a way out of this conundrum, but as valuable works on civilians and northern religion (for example, Sean Scott's 2011 *A Visitation of God* and George Rable's 2010 *God's Almost Chosen People*) appear, perhaps they will suggest approaches that scholars of soldiers can use to good effect.

An important subfield still in its infancy places Union soldiers within the context of the communities from which they sprang, and uses them to study the mutual effects of antebellum values on the war, and of the war on antebellum values. A recent example is Nicole Etcheson's *A Generation at War: The Civil War Era in a Northern Community* (2011), which deeply studies an Indiana county before, during, and after the Civil War.

Finally, historians of Union soldiers are finally beginning to overcome one of the field's greatest occupational hazards, and that is going home as soon as the guns fall silent. It is not hard to understand why studies of Civil War soldiers have, by and large, ended shortly after Appomattox since at that point most men ceased to be soldiers, with the notable exception of the black Union soldiers discussed in Elizabeth Leonard's *Men of Color to Arms! Black Soldiers, Indian Wars, and the Quest for Equality* (2010). Yet the questions raised by the war

were not neatly answered in 1865, as recent work on veterans is beginning to acknowledge. Donald Shaffer's *After the Glory: The Struggles of Black Civil War Veterans* (2004) got the ball rolling, and in the last two years alone, Barbara Gannon's *The Won Cause* (2011), Frances Clarke's *War Stories* (2011), James Marten's *Sing Not War* (2011) and Robert Hunt's *The Good Men Who Won the War* (2010) have all explicitly taken Union war veterans as their subjects and starting points for asking important questions about the postwar period. Perhaps the sudden burst of works on Civil War veterans can help historians of Union soldiers, and Civil War historians generally, better connect the antebellum, wartime, and postbellum worlds. After all, soldiers did not suddenly come into existence the moment they enlisted, nor did their lives cease at muster out, and there really is no way to examine long-term effects of the war without taking postwar decades into account.

Big questions about the Civil War—questions about freedom, the State, race, gender, the place of the United States in the world, and religion—did not start and stop with the Civil War either. Maybe Billy Yank can help us take those on, especially if the historians who study him further the promising developments of placing him in a world context, and trying to understand him both before and after the Civil War.