

Living Hell: The Dark Side of the Civil War

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Recommended Citation

Rodgers, Thomas E. (2014) "Living Hell: The Dark Side of the Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.16.3.14

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol16/iss3/12>

Review

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Summer 2014

Adams, Michael C.C. *Living Hell: The Dark Side of the Civil War*. Johns Hopkins University Press, \$29.95 ISBN 978-1-4214-1221-4

Reexamining the Horrors of the Civil War

Living Hell is the latest book by military historian Michael C. C. Adams, a professor emeritus of Northern Kentucky University. Adams has published a similarly themed book on World War II, as well as three other military tomes on various conflicts, including an award winning work on leaders of the Army of the Potomac. Adams uses his research on other wars to make some insightful comparisons and contrasts with soldier experiences in the Civil War.

The author's purpose in writing *Living Hell* is clearly stated in the book's preface: "This book paints a graphic picture of the dark side of the Civil War, its pain, heartbreak, and tragedy." (ix) The palette for his graphic painting consists of an extensive number of predominantly published memoirs, diaries, and letters of both soldiers and civilians. Adams also draws on a wide array of secondary works to reinforce some of the points he wishes to make. Even though Adams makes some assertions that many scholars might find provocative, he has chosen not to become sidetracked from his primary mission by engaging in extended critiques of the existing Civil War literature. In addition, the author generally avoids considering factors that might off-set the human tragedy of the conflict. While Adams does "not wish to deny the great issues involved and civic virtue shown, the fighting that produced prodigious courage, sacrifice, endurance, and magnanimity among soldiers and civilians," his book focuses on the need to "remind ourselves now and then about the grimmer realities of this struggle and, perhaps by extension, all armed conflicts." (5)

The book has an "Opening" chapter providing background on disease, medical practice, and other topics germane to later discussions, and a "Closing" describing a generally negative postwar attitude toward soldiers until about 1876, and then a shift to more positive attitudes toward the war and its

participants. Many will be incredulous at the author's assertion that Grant's election to the presidency in 1868 during this negative period had nothing to do with his war hero status, but instead was the result of people recognizing "his executive experience and presumed devotion to public service." (207) In between these bookend sections are eight chapters dealing with different hellish aspects of the conflict. Chapter one describes recruitment and camp life. Adams pushes a poor man's war position on recruiting, and tells the reader that discipline made soldiers "feel more like prisoners than some legendary Achilles." (18) Camps are portrayed as having been filled with various illnesses, thefts, gambling, drunkenness, and venereal diseases. Of particular interest, is Adams's discussion of homesickness or "nostalgia" that he claims killed 5000 Union soldiers in the first year of the war. The author omits any mention of the religious revivals, temperance societies, and other such non-vice activities that set Civil War forces apart from most modern armies.

In chapter two, Adams describes armies on the march as being like moving cities. The miseries of troops in both armies are portrayed as they encountered inadequate food, water, and clothing, unsanitary conditions, diseases, multitudes of flies and lice, and exhausting marches. In chapter three, weaponry and tactics are explained, the horrors of the battlefield graphically described, the high death rates of officers explored, and the dreadful character of naval warfare portrayed. Chapter four is on the aftermath of battle. It contains discussions of medical treatment of the wounded, lack of medical sanitation and its consequences; maggots in wounds of casualties, hogs dining on the dead, burial procedures, and rain storms washing corpses out of their graves. These three chapters are the most effective part of the book in promoting the author's living hell goals. Indeed, Civil War scholars will find the horrors recounted in these parts of the book amplified as they evoke memories of gory and macabre passages they have read in the past.

Chapter five covers mental injuries caused by the war. Many will find Adams's assertion that troops undergo a hardening process "Only in myth" (115) hard to accept; especially, since he does not engage those holding opposite views. Also, he ignores the fact that the published diaries of Cyrus Boyd and Elisha Rhodes that he cites multiple times contain profound statements about the hardening process, and Boyd provides an astounding example of hardened men when he describes soldiers laughing and telling jokes while engaged in an utterly grotesque burial detail. In addition, Adams never explores the question of whether the pervasive Christian fatalism or other cultural values different from

today of the people of that time might have caused them to perceive the realities of the war differently than a modern person.

Adams contends that there was widespread suffering on both home fronts in chapter six. His portrayal of shortages, hardships, and death are much more cogent for the South than for the North. The author fails to take into account northern female networks, kin and neighbor unofficial safety nets, the much larger number of men at home in the North than in the South, extensive private and public charity, and other factors that mitigated many of the problems he describes for the North. The author's assertion that hardships "tore holes in the fabric of conventional patriotism" (141) is similarly more convincing for the South than the North.

The contention of chapter seven is that Union soldiers became ever more hateful and violent toward southern women and rebel soldiers. Adams uses the famous Benjamin Butler order for his men to speak to the women of New Orleans as if they were prostitutes as part of his evidence for hardening attitudes toward the enemy. The problem with this example is that it is undermined by much of the reaction to it that the author omits from the book. Not only was there outrage across the South, but also sufficient criticism by the *New York Times* and others in the North, English newspapers, and the British Parliament to lead to Butler's removal from command in New Orleans. As for Union soldiers evolving a war psychosis, trying to identify long-term, widespread attitude changes among Union soldiers is difficult for a number of reasons: no one has ever established the predominant views of Union soldiers when they entered the army; there was a large turnover of troops so at any given time the army was a combination of veterans molded by combat and new recruits; and soldiers could be mercurial in their attitudes. A good example of the latter is the published letters of John F. Brobst. Adams quotes an epistle written after the Fort Pillow massacre in which Brobst describes the killing of captured rebels by his unit and others. The letter supports Adams's view of an evolving "rage of war psychosis," (167) but a letter not cited in the book from three months later, after his anger over Fort Pillow had subsided, paints a different picture. Brobst wrote about a pleasant dinner with two rebels apparently during an impromptu truce and stated the unrage-like view: "If they would let the soldiers settle this thing it would not be long before we would be on terms of peace. . . ." (Brobst 80)

The author attempts "to assess the war's outcomes, including its high human and material costs" (182) in chapter eight, which is perhaps the least satisfying

section of the book. Adams's discussion of the war's impact on women, labor, and blacks tends to ramble with numerous asides about an array of current issues from charter schools to photo I.D.s and voting. No mention is made of a number of things directly connected to the war, including the Cult of the Lost Cause, reburial of the Union dead, and the impact on southern (Solid South), black (for the party of Lincoln), and Republican ("waving the bloody shirt") political activity.

While the book is largely well-written, its editors missed many careless errors. The reader is told that 104,556 Americans (23) died in the Mexican War (eight times the actual number, fewer than 116,000 Americans served in the war), Union forces (67) lost 7,000 men in twenty minutes at Cold Harbor (it was an hour), the second KKK originated in Indiana (created in 1915, reached Indiana 1920), six fact-filled paragraphs on 61-62 have no footnotes, the source of two provocative quotations on 166 are not on any of the pages cited in the footnote, and no citations could be found for two quotations on the following page. In addition, a few odd sentences should have been caught by editors, such as: "Infant girls learned early to sew and cook." (142)

Overall, Adams succeeds in displaying many of the war's living hell aspects, but in doing so he makes it even more puzzling why men are paradoxically both attracted and repelled by war. Union soldier Cyrus Boyd captured this ambiguous attitude toward war when he wrote in his diary after experiencing Shiloh: "War is *hell* broke loose. . . . I do not want to see any more such scenes and yet I would not have missed this for any consideration." (Boyd, 42)

Thomas E. Rodgers teaches at the University of Southern Indiana. He is the author of a number of articles on the Civil War, including: "Saving the Republic: Turnout, Ideology, and Republicanism in the Election of 1860," in The Election of 1860 Reconsidered, edited by A. James Fuller (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2013), 165-192; "Billy Yank," in Essential Civil War Curriculum (Virginia Center for Civil War Studies, Virginia Tech University, August 2013), <http://www.essentialcivilwarcurriculum/>; "Billy Yank and G.I. Joe: An Exploratory Essay on the Sociopolitical Dimensions of Soldier Motivation," The Journal of Military History 69 (January 2005), 93-121.