

The Printer's Kiss: The Life and Letters of a Civil War Newspaperman and His Family

Matthew Perreault

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

Recommended Citation

Perreault, Matthew (2015) "The Printer's Kiss: The Life and Letters of a Civil War Newspaperman and His Family," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 17 : Iss. 1 , Article 25.

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.17.1.26

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol17/iss1/25>

Review

Perreault, Matthew

Winter 2015

Donohoe, Patricia A. *The Printer's Kiss: The Life and Letters of a Civil War Newspaperman and His Family*. The Kent State University Press, \$39.95 ISBN 9781606352168

An Intimate Look at a Single Civil War Experience

“The two most precious things this side of the grave are reputation and life, but it is to be lamented that the most contemptible whisper may deprive us of the one, and the weakest weapon deprive us of the other” (Donohoe 226). This Charles Caleb Colton aphorism, published by Will Tomlinson in his first newspaper, *Freedom's Casket*, is an effective metaphor for Tomlinson's life. Will Tomlinson was a man who had a reputation for leaving a trail of liquor, blood, and ink wherever he went. In *The Printer's Kiss: The Life and Letters of a Civil War Newspaperman and His Family*, Patricia A. Donohoe compiles over 120 letters from the Wylie-Tomlinson Letter Collection to illuminate the story of her great-great-grandparents, Will and Eliza Wylie Tomlinson, as they experienced the Civil War in the Ohio River borderlands. Her narrative is an intensely intimate one, a small microhistory of the Civil War, detailing the aspirations and fears of a family torn by war.

Donohoe's flowery prose lends the work a voice akin to that of historical fiction, yet Tomlinson's story is remarkably true. Weaving together some of Tomlinson's letters in *The Ripley (Ohio) Bee* with a select hundred letters between newspaperman Will Tomlinson, his wife, Eliza Wylie Tomlinson, and their children, Byers and Belle, Donohoe provides a powerful narrative that documents the dynamics of the Wylie-Tomlinson family. There are three recurring motifs that Donohoe constantly refers back to – Tomlinson's habitual drinking, his belligerent nature, and his series of editorial positions – and these three themes shaped Tomlinson's reputation and ultimately led to his premature demise.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Tomlinson left his publishing job to become a quartermaster sergeant in the Fifth Ohio before being elected captain of a counterinsurgent company in western Virginia. He was discharged due to poor health, but more notably due to an incident involving the use of extrajudicial force possibly while under the influence of alcohol. Tomlinson then became an unofficial scout in Kentucky while working as a typesetter for the pro-Union *Cincinnati Gazette* and continuing to publish on his own. While his professional writings contained harsh invective directed at Copperheads and other "traitors", his private letters revealed the depth of his emotion as he despaired over every Union defeat and rejoiced in every Union victory. Donohoe offers multiple scenarios that may have occurred in the lead-up to Will Tomlinson's death at the hands of a Copperhead in November 1863, but it was certainly political as it was known that Tomlinson's "political vehemence had already erupted in violent outbursts" (Donohoe 244). The trail of liquor and ink had ended in blood for Will Tomlinson.

Will Tomlinson receives top-billing in Donohoe's book, but equally important is his wife, Eliza. Her letters to her husband are more than just snapshots of the homefront. Eliza's letters encapsulate her fears about Will's safety and the approach of John Hunt Morgan's raiders, yet they also contain a high degree of political awareness. One letter even sees Eliza lecture Will on military leadership, reminding him that "eternal vigilance is the price of liberty" (Donohoe 127). The most intriguing correspondence though comes during a period of marital estrangement when Eliza made aspersions on Will's character due to allegations of adultery, gambling, and drunkenness. A surviving letter fragment shows Will defend himself against the former accusations, but willingly admit that "I do drink. I drink a great deal. Lately in my gloom I have drank to such excess that I have been inebriated – intoxicated" (Donohoe 229). Reading such personal correspondence seems a trespass into their lives, but it is enlightening to see what effect Will Tomlinson's reputation had even on the most important people in his life.

Despite eloquently providing the necessary background to the events in each letter, Donohoe's editing lacks a full analysis of these events. Of course, this is not the purpose of her book. Donohoe is merely giving context to the letters by providing the historical narrative underlying them, but a critical perspective would highlight some of the more intriguing aspects of Tomlinson's career. One such episode includes Tomlinson's efforts to raise a brigade of African-American soldiers, especially in a city with the level of racial violence

as existed in Cincinnati at that time. While not opposed to emancipation, Tomlinson's mixed feelings regarding African-American rights raises questions about to what extent he truly believed in their military prowess versus his ardent desire to receive another military commission despite a blemished reputation.

Those readers expecting detailed information about Civil War print culture will be sorely disappointed since little attention is paid to the economics of the newspaper trade nor the readership effect in this book about a Civil War newspaperman. Throughout his lifetime, Tomlinson published ten newspapers and worked at five more, yet this account mostly gives the chronological timeline of when each paper was active without much in-depth analysis on their successes and (many) failures. However, Donohoe makes an excellent connection between liquor and violence to the press. With the constant agitation and harsh invective from printers and editors of the era, there was an ever-present danger of inciting violence. Hinted at in an early chapter when Tomlinson's printing press was burned down due to his antislavery views, in 1863 both Republicans and anti-war Democrats in Ohio took aim at the newspaper offices of their opponents, destroying them. There is much more that could be said about mob actions, incitement by printers and editors, and newspaper offices as targets of violence, but Donohoe keeps the focus tightly on Tomlinson who was not personally involved in these riots though he denounced the "home traitors [who] played such havoc with a loyal printing office and other property" (Donohoe 212).

Ultimately, *The Printer's Kiss* is a fantastic collection of primary source material regarding one family's experience during the Civil War in southern Ohio. Donohoe has done tremendous research in compiling and contextualizing all of the letters in the Wylie-Tomlinson Letter Collection, but historians may be disappointed at the lack of analysis, especially regarding Civil War print culture.

Matthew Perreault is a graduate student at Louisiana State University. He is currently researching horse racing in Progressive Era New Orleans.