

Marching Home: Union Veterans and Their Unending Civil War

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Review

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Jordan, Brian Matthew *Marching Home: Union Veterans and Their Unending Civil War*. Liveright Publishing Corporation, \$28.95 ISBN 9780871407818

Returning Home Presented a Daunting Challenge for Civil War Veterans

Brian Matthew Jordan's *Marching Home: Union Veterans and Their Unending Civil War* is a fascinating new look into Civil War soldiers' postwar adjustments to returning home. Jordan notes that what little work currently exists focuses too narrowly on the veterans' "fraternal rituals, their infamous pension lobbying, and their reunions, parades, and monuments" (3). Jordan identifies Gerald Linderman (*Embattled Courage*) and his assertion that Union soldiers paid "as little heed as possible to the memories of the war" as representative of the existing historiography on the subject, a notion which he counters: "Afflicted with guilt, sorrow, and purposelessness, Union soldiers considered homecoming a task as onerous and demanding as any military campaign" (3).

Jordan's opening chapter covers the Grand Review of the Armies in the nation's capital May 23 and 24, 1865. Typically this event is described as a triumphal celebration a month after these armies had accepted the surrender of their counterparts. Jordan suggests that most soldiers wanted to simply go home and saw these parades and all the accompanying ceremonies as a major delay in their return to civilian life and the loved ones many had not seen for four years. Anxiety ran rampant in this early period after the cessation of hostilities as some soldiers wanted to remain in the army but were unsure if they would be allowed, while many civilians feared the return home of these citizens turned soldiers who had been gone for so long.

In 1865 the return home of two million soldiers was unprecedented. Soldiers clashed with civilians along the way home, with saloonkeepers frequently the only friendly faces as soldiers passed through various waypoints. Unemployment was high in 1865 with the wartime economy now over, and many merchants and industrialists feared hiring these men who had become accustomed to violence.

Disabled soldiers found making ends meet particularly difficult: while the average laborer made \$44 per month, early pensions were for just \$4 or \$8, an amount totally insufficient for survival.

Largely abandoned by civilians, former soldiers banded together for survival. The primary example of their communal activities is the GAR or Grand Army of the Republic, an association founded in 1866 and active for ninety years. In the first decades after the war “many ex-soldiers were wracked by niggling fears that the war’s results were tentative at best” (71). In his middle chapters Jordan focuses on two veteran sub-groups: amputees and former prisoners of war. As the North lacked the physical scars of the war, the 50,000 Union soldiers with missing limbs served as a visual reminder of the costs of the war: “His wounds lent realism and authenticity to his experiences, something that other veterans seeking to explain the brutality of the war could only hope to approximate” (108). Jordan notes that at a time when non-veterans were seeking sectional reconciliation, “Prison stories, civilians thought, would unnecessarily conjure up the demons of the past” (134), this despite ex-prisoners needing public recognition of their sacrifice even more than their comrades who had not suffered their ordeal. Thus many former POWs created special societies where they were able to connect with peers who understood their particular experiences.

As veterans moved toward their dotage they faced another dilemma: “By the turn of the century, Americans had done so much to trumpet the common soldier’s courage that any veteran who begged for assistance was immediately perceived as less than manly” (147). Finally, however, the Pension Act of 1890 offered the promise of some assistance, though it could be hard to prove eligibility and many veterans cursed the examination process that had proven them fit for duty in fifteen minutes in 1861 but now took up to fifteen years to certify them sufficiently disabled to qualify for a pension. For many soldiers a pension application was a dual sword of publicly asking for help on the one hand while demanding a recognition of the soldier’s sacrifice on the other. Ultimately the question came down to whether the pension was a soldier’s right or a gratuity. A final chapter considers the role of homes or asylums for soldiers, another form of public assistance that recognized the ex-soldiers’ great sacrifices for their country.

Marching Home is the most comprehensive look we currently have at the lives of Civil War veterans. The book belongs to an emerging historiography on

the dark side of the war, but Jordan is at pains to show the varied experiences of Civil War veterans rather than positing any one experience as an archetype. Jordan writes very well and has structured his book in a clear and compelling fashion. Most of the focus is on the first fifty years after the war, but that is logical given the small number of veterans who lived past that period. Of particular value for those interested in this topic are Jordan's 93 pages of notes and fifty-page bibliography. In his introduction Jordan suggests a link to the present, noting that 26,000 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are homeless, and that "like their forerunners in blue, they will ensure that debates over the meaning of the war will be long, difficult, and complex" (8). As a society we would do well to remember Jordan's earlier assertion that "Union soldiers considered homecoming a task as onerous and demanding as any military campaign" (3).

Jared Peatman is the author of The Long Shadow of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and is currently at work on a book about the 20th Maine and Joshua Chamberlain.