

A Civil War Soldier of Christ and Country, the Selected Correspondence of John Rodgers Meigs, 1859-1864

Arthur W. Bergeron Jr.

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Review

Bergeron, Arthur W., Jr.

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Giunta, Mary A., ed. *A Civil War Soldier of Christ and Country, The Selected Correspondence of John Rodgers Meigs, 1859-1864*. University of Illinois Press, \$60.00 hardcover ISBN 9780252030765

Fact and Fiction?

Two Accounts of the Civil War Experience

Boy Soldier of the Confederacy: The Memoir of Johnnie Wickersham Edited by Kathleen Gorman

A Civil War Soldier of Christ and Country: The Selected Correspondence of John Rodgers Meigs, 1859-1864 Edited by Mary A. Giunta

Originally published in 1915 as *The Gray and the Blue*, John T. Wickersham's stories about his experiences in the Confederate army during the Civil War have been edited in this new edition by Professor Kathleen Gorman. Johnnie Wickersham claimed to have joined the Confederate army in Missouri at age 14 and to have served with it until May 1865. He also stated that he received a captain's commission from General Sterling Price. Gorman acknowledges that there is no record of Wickersham as a soldier. It appears that he simply attached himself to a volunteer company in which one of his brothers served, probably a company in the 4th Missouri Infantry Regiment (later the 1st and 4th Missouri Consolidated Infantry). Due to the lack of any documentary evidence, it is unclear if he was actually present with this regiment when it surrendered. Wickersham's narrative makes it clear that for long periods of time he was detached or otherwise absent from the army.

In her introduction, Gorman says that throughout his writings, fact mingles with fiction, the line separating the two often difficult to determine (ix). A close examination of the memoir, especially when weighed against historical evidence, clearly reveals that the majority of it is fiction. Some of Wickersham's stories are

patently absurd. One of the most striking of these is his account of commanding a battery of boy artillerists who fired small breechloading cannons at Union vessels on the Mississippi River. This episode is a part of a longer section where Wickersham claims that he was acting as an aide to General (actually Colonel) Colton Greene while the latter was on sick leave at a plantation in northwestern Mississippi in 1862. Greene's military records show that he was never in Mississippi, questioning the authenticity of this entire portion of the memoir.

Nevertheless, Gorman writes that she finds the fiction instructive for what it says of the need for veterans on a losing side to maintain the honor of their cause (ix). Wickersham penned his memoirs at age 69 with the encouragement of friends and family but, as he wrote, more particularly for the benefit of my ten-year-old Grandson. Rather than falling into the category of some Lost Cause conspiracy, the stories are probably more in the vein of the desire of an old man to entertain a grandchild with tales he knew were false even though he said in his prologue that they were the true personal escapades of a boy that are known, told, retold, and discussed by all the members of the family around the fireside of your Grandfather (1).

This reviewer has seen few more poorly edited books. At times, people and places are not identified at all. There are a number of egregious historical errors in the introduction and endnotes. Several examples of such errors should suffice. Gorman writes that Wickersham fought the few remaining months with his unit and surrenders with them in New Orleans (xvi). All but a handful of these Missouri Confederates became prisoners of war at Fort Blakely, Alabama, on April 9, 1865, and did not surrender in the Crescent City. In a note, Gorman says, Most Missouri units (including the First) arrived at Shiloh immediately after the major battle there and in the next sentence states, There is confusion over whether these forces actually made it to Shiloh (146n4). If the Missourians had arrived at Shiloh shortly after the battle, they would have found there only victorious Union forces, the Confederate army having retreated from that point to Corinth, Mississippi. General Earl Van Dorn's army, which included the Missouri troops, did not reach Corinth until a week later. Finally, Gorman tells of the surrender of General Edmund Kirby Smith's Trans-Mississippi Confederate army at New Orleans and claims He returned to New Orleans [from Texas] to find he had no more troops there (151n6). None of Kirby Smith's men had ever been in the Crescent City to surrender. The only Confederates in the city were three of his subordinate generals who went there to negotiate terms.

With so much of Wickersham's account being fictitious, it really adds very little to our understanding of the life of a common soldier or of the events in which the Missouri regiments participated.

Published soldier letters have long been a valuable source of descriptions of Civil War battles, marches, and camp scenes. In *A Civil War Soldier of Christ and Country*, the reader will also find much valuable detail on life at the United States Military Academy during the first three years of the conflict. Mary Giunta has chosen what she describes as John Rogers Meigs's most important private correspondence and a selected group of his official correspondence and documents (xviii) for inclusion in the book. John was the oldest child of noted engineer and architect Montgomery C. Meigs, who rose to become Quartermaster General of the Union army during the war.

Young Meigs graduated first in his class on June 11, 1863, and received a commission as lieutenant of engineers. He had already experienced combat when he went on leave from West Point and acted as a volunteer aide to Colonel Isrl B. Richardson of the 2nd Michigan Infantry Regiment during the First Battle of Manassas. Meigs's early engineering duties occurred in Maryland and West Virginia from July to November 1863. From November 1863 until August 1864, he served as Chief Engineer of the Department of West Virginia. His last post was as Chief Engineer of the Middle Military Division and aide-de-camp to General Philip Sheridan from August 1864 until his death in October of that year. His assignments had him serving under generals Benjamin F. Kelley, William W. Averell, Franz Sigel, and David Hunter. Meigs was present at a number of battles and engagements, including Rocky Gap, Droop Mountain, Staunton, New Market, Lynchburg, Piedmont, Opequon, and Fisher's Hill.

Although most of his personal wartime letters contain rich detail on engineering operations and the movements of Union forces, Meigs rarely provided any assessment of his commanding generals. He described Averell as very kind and pleasant (192). Of Sigel's performance at New Market, Meigs wrote that he behaved with a great deal of personal gallantry but did not manage his troops well (222). He also did not expend much ink in describing battles; his longest accounts are of New Market and Piedmont. The letters do include a number of rich nuggets of information. For example, he described the temporary defenses used by Confederate troops at Piedmont: The Rebels made strong breastworks in five minutes of fence rails, laid sloping against a fence and with chinks open everywhere. Our Napoleon shell glanced from these inclined shields

in some instances (226). Meigs provided a wonderful description of the wounding of Brigadier General Albert T. A. Torbert at the Battle of Opeguon. He saw a Confederate soldier walk alone out into an open field, raise his rifle, and fire. Meigs heard the ball whistle through the air before hitting Torbert.

Meigs died in an encounter with Confederate soldiers near Dayton, Virginia, on October 3, 1864. His father and General Sheridan thought that this had been an ambush. So incensed was the latter that he ordered his men to burn the town and all buildings and houses within five miles of the scene of the killing (7). The grieving father attempted to find proof of murder but failed to do so. Giunta has included an epilogue that thoroughly examines the documents collected during this investigation. Those papers clearly show that John died at the hands of regular Confederate soldiers, not guerrillas.

Regrettably, Giunta did not provide any notes for the letters and other documents in this volume. Instead the reader will find a Glossary of Names, Places, and Phrases that provides brief identifications. No sources are given for the information in the glossary entries. That criticism aside, the book is a welcome addition to the literature of the Civil War. Put together, these two books—one that chronicles the soldierly life of a young soldier through archival evidence and the other a purported memoir that proves to be patently fictitious—illustrate the necessity to critically judge sources if we are to gain a true understanding of the Civil War experience.

Arthur W. Bergeron, Jr. is a reference historian at the U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA. He is the author, co-author, or editor of nearly a dozen books on the American Civil War.