

### The Words of War

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## Review

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**Bracken, Donagh** *The Words of War*. History Publishing Company, \$24.95 hardcover ISBN 9781933909325

### Reporting the Civil War

In this self-published work by Donagh Bracken, (he is the founder of the History Publishing Company), the author compares the Civil War battlefield reporting of the *Charleston Mercury* to that of the *New York Times*. In addition to his many corporate endeavors, Bracken's Civil War research experience includes work on the virtual American Civil War Historyscope Series, a project that produced computer-generated sites for classroom study.

American newspapers of the 19th century were famous for being shrill partisan tools of the wealthiest political parties. Democrats, Whigs, and then Republicans all used the papers as their mouthpieces. Reporters and publishers including the *Charleston Mercury's* Robert Barnwell Rhett and *New York Times'* Henry J. Raymond were not known for letting truth, facts, or objectivity stand in the way of the promotion of their cause of the day. When civil war came, they dived into their respective sides with all their heart. In New York, Raymond's *Times* was one of seventeen New York papers, and but one of only five of them even nominally supported the Lincoln's war efforts. In Charleston, South Carolina, Rhett's *Mercury* transitioned from the leading advocate for secession to strongly promoting the war.

The book follows the war with cut-and-paste *Times* and *Mercury* reports of 17 selected battles and the fall of Charleston, South Carolina. The coverage begins with the Confederate firing on Fort Sumter and concludes with Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox. The choice of battles is interesting. Readers will not be surprised to see battle choices like Gettysburg, the Wilderness, and Atlanta. But one is left wondering why lesser engagements including Williamsburg and the Third Battle of Winchester are covered while the newspaper coverage of much larger conflicts like Chickamauga and Chattanooga

are ignored. Each chapter begins with a paragraph or two introducing the event then follows with newspaper descriptions of battles. Each is then summarized with a very short section of a few paragraphs entitled What Historians Say, a section that summarizes each of the battles. The intention of the work is to not to be a narrative of the war, but rather a view of how northern and southern readers would have viewed the events at the time. Although it is highly debatable that, as the author contends, for most Americans, newspapers were their only reading material, the papers were an important source of information for people on both sides of the conflict and this work gives the reader a hint of what first impressions Civil War readers may have been left with. But journalists of all eras are limited. With the inevitable fog of war and limited investigative resources, it is little wonder that the accounts of events like the First and Second Battles of Manassas were riddled with errors. For example, after both battles of Manassas, the *Mercury* erroneously reported that Union General Irvin McDowell had been mortally wounded. One would think they would have gotten it right after the first misprint.

This work is intended for the general reader to get an idea of how these two partisan papers covered the war, and here it succeeds. However many students of the war will recognize that much of this material has been available elsewhere. For example, the *New York Times* has had its archives available online and accessible for some time now. In addition, this is not the first attempt to compare and contrast northern and southern war journalists. Edward L. Ayers's outstanding Valley of the Shadow online project provides one of the most influential comparisons, where students of the war can read wartime newspapers from a county in Pennsylvania and compare them with accounts from the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. For a more detailed discussion of Civil War journalists one would want to start with James M. Perry's, *A Bohemian Brigade: The Civil War Correspondents, Mostly Rough, Sometimes Ready*, (2000), and the now out of print works of Louis M. Starr, *Reporting the Civil War: The Bohemian Brigade in Action, 1861-65*, (1962), and J. Cutler Andrews's *The North Reports the Civil War*, (1955) and *The South Reports the Civil War*, (1970). One thing that would make this work far more readable for the novice and expert alike would be the addition of footnotes. Well-researched notes would help identify the numerous references in the newspapers to people and events that are not part of today's common knowledge.

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Saltville Massacre and Let Us Meet in Heaven: The Civil War Letters of James Michl Barr, 5th South Carolina Cavalry. *In the fall of 2008, Southern Illinois University Press will release his third book, Cumberland Blood: Champ Ferguson's Civil War.*