

Faces of the Confederacy: an Album of Southern Soldiers and Their Stories

John Daley

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Recommended Citation

Daley, John (2009) "Faces of the Confederacy: an Album of Southern Soldiers and Their Stories," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 4, Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol11/iss4/11>

Review

Daley, John

Fall 2009

Coddington, Ronald S. *Faces of the Confederacy: An Album of Southern Soldiers and Their Stories*. Johns Hopkins University Press, \$29.95 ISBN 9780801890192

A Deeper Look at the Confederate Soldier

Consciously taking cues from Thomas Macaulay and Thomas Carlyle, Ronald S. Coddington has presented history as a sum of individual experiences in this collection of seventy-seven short biographies of Confederate soldiers, a companion volume to his *Faces of the Civil War: An Album of Union Soldiers and Their Stories* (2004). The omission of generals and colonels is purposeful, for if the history of the war is but the stories of the soldiers who fought it, the lower ranks have been badly underrepresented. This is especially true of the Confederate States, where a lower literacy rate and hit-or-miss military record-keeping has ever after compounded the bias of far more numerous campaign and battle studies in which an individual who does not command rarely matters much to an author proving a thesis. That Carlyle sometimes limited his definition of history to the experiences of *great* men and, at other times, broadened it to include all "distillation of rumor" should not obscure Coddington's fundamental purpose: to do justice to that majority of ordinary men who found themselves in extraordinary circumstances. For them, complete stories are scarce and, vivid and enduring though it has been, Bell Wiley's *The Life of Johnny Reb* (1962) is but a composite.

The Internet and Interlibrary Loan have allowed Coddington to tread where Wiley and other predecessors could not. While awaiting responses to his Civil War Message Board Portal and GenForum.com queries, he mined Ancestry.com, digitized Library of Congress records and pension files in state archives. On-site research in the Library of Congress and National Archives turned up service records, as did the *Southern Historical Society Papers*, newspapers and regimental histories. Even with internet help, it took him an average of two

months to piece together each life.

The only collective profile is that created by Coddington's clearly defined research parameters. All subjects had posed for *carte de visite* photographs, most of which were taken before the Union blockade obstructed the distribution of photographic equipment. Only pictures in good condition were included, and about half of those came from a single Virginia collection. And even though colonels and above are missing, junior officers are overrepresented. Fortunately, unavoidable skewing in favor of good pictures, location, and a more literate segment of Southern society matters little when specific birthplaces, social classes, battles, and campaigns are beside the point. Far more important is the range of individual experiences both during and after the war. In this cross-section of officers (nine field grade and thirty-eight company grade), twenty-two enlisted men, seven surgeons and a chaplain, averages prove elusive and archetypes, non-existent.

Coddington's explicitly unscientific sample is revealing enough. Behind the proud visages of the *dramatis personae* there are more sad stories than happy ones. Not only did far too many die young, but we see ample proof that the nineteenth-century usage of "convalescent" was far narrower than our own. Amputees there were, but far more veterans suffered from psychological damage that too many of their Victorian contemporaries simply dismissed as an inherent and fundamentally untreatable lack of character. *Faces of the Confederacy* is an indispensable new window on the Civil War and the society that fought it.

John Daley is an associate professor of history and chair of the Department of History at Pittsburg State University in southeastern Kansas.