

### Mosquito Soldiers: Malaria, Yellow Fever, and the Course of the American Civil War

Frank R. Freemon

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## Review

Freemon, Frank R.

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**Bell, Andrew McIlwaine** *Mosquito Soldiers: Malaria, Yellow Fever, and the Course of the American Civil War*. Louisiana State University Press, \$29.95  
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### Examining the Role of Disease and the Civil War

The shelf of important Civil War books has become the Civil War wing of the library. How can anyone come up with anything new? A change of viewpoint always gives a more panoramic sweep. We can compare the viewpoints of the North, fighting against the horrible institution of slavery, versus the South, resisting invasion. We could compare the views of the commanding general, worried about strategy, while the infantryman worries about his next meal. More recently, we have enlarged our understanding by looking at the war through the eyes of women. This is, however, the first book that looks at the war from the point of view of the tiny mosquito.

The mosquito was more important than he appears. Contemporaries had no idea, but he carried two important diseases. Yellow fever hit ports and hit them hard, killing many and sometimes spreading inland, but disappearing quickly. Malaria came upon the population as a great, groaning pestilence seldom killing, but causing great distress. Malaria was most common among people sleeping outdoors, such as soldiers. It was most troublesome in regions with standing water, areas with recent construction of trenches, canals, and fortifications.

So how does the war look through the multi-faceted eye of the mosquito? Soldiers hate us. They swing their dirty hands, crushing our colleagues in a horrible splash of blood. It is not our blood, but blood sucked from these vicious creatures. These men have divided themselves into two groups but we cannot differentiate them. We get even for their violence against us because we introduce viruses and parasites. The virus causes liver failure and jaundice, a condition they call yellow fever. The parasite causes great suffering among many

thousands of them. With the first frost of the season, however, we must disappear and they slowly recover. We will be back in the spring to go at them again.

The human author who describes the mosquito's experience is Andrew McIlwaine Bell. This book is his dissertation, written in 2006 at George Washington University under the supervision of Tyler Anbinder, a historian most noted for his study of the Five Points area of lower Manhattan, graphically recreated in the film, *Gangs of New York*. The author has spent a great deal of effort to examine the afflictions carried from person to person by the mosquito. The book repays careful study, but one must wonder if the author's underlying bias may influence his conclusions.

Memories of great battles "overshadowed less pleasant memories of jaundiced and feverish young soldiers writhing in agony upon their hospital beds" (p. 116). In the first place, malaria causes horrible shaking chills and soldiers pulling blankets up to their chins on the hottest day. They do not writhe. But the main problem is the apparent suggestion that it is better to be wounded than to be sick. People of that era knew the misery of battle. For many years after the war, every American village, North and South, had one or more citizens missing limbs. The wounded continued to suffer for the remainder of their lives. Joshua Chamberlin, for example, even when he was the governor of Maine, experienced excruciating pain every time he urinated. Small pieces of feces were mixed with his urine because a Confederate minie ball had produced a permanent fistula between his bowel and his bladder. Those wounded suffered just as much, if not more, and for much longer, than those who were ill.

The author has an odd view of the practice of medicine. He cringes when a Civil War doctor administers a medication that we now know is dangerous but points out that this therapy, regardless of present knowledge, "proved effective from time to time" (p. 4). He apparently determines success by the formula: a patient is sick, a medication is given, the patient recovers, the medication worked. This common logical fallacy prevents an understanding of the biological basis of historical events.

In summary, the book leaves the reviewer with mixed feelings. While wary of some of the Bell's ideas, one can appreciate his labor of love and gains perspective by looking at the Civil War through the eyes of its smallest participant, the mosquito. Does anyone know of a book written from the point of

view of the horse?

*Frank R. Freemon is Professor Emeritus at Vanderbilt University and is the author of Gangrene and Glory.*