

The Yankee Plague: Escaped Union Prisoners And The Collapse Of The Confederacy

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Review

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Foote, Lorien *The Yankee Plague: Escaped Union Prisoners and the Collapse of the Confederacy*. University of North Carolina Press, \$34.95 ISBN 9781469630557

Union Prisoners: Heralds of Defeat and Omens of Historical Process

For a few months in late 1864 and early 1865 a brigade of ragged Union soldiers flooded the Confederate backcountry, disrupting military operations, terrorizing southern civilians, and forming alliances with slaves, free blacks, and white Unionists. This was not a bold raid by a dashing cavalry unit, but individual and small bands of ragged escapees from Confederate prison camps. Lorien Foote has drawn on nearly one hundred published narratives, scores of unpublished narratives, and a wide array of other sources, to create a database of more than 3000 runaway Yankees. She has painstakingly recreated at least part of forty separate itineraries, and follows four particular groups from journey's beginning to end. The result is a well-conceived and well-written account of a phenomenon that caused consternation throughout the South and sparked an entire genre of memoirs after the war.

But the value of the book transcends narrating the experiences of these hardy and determined men—although she has captured the drama, poignancy, and adventure of their journeys, each of which offers a ripping yarn. The accounts of the men who fled prison camps during the waning months of the Confederacy capture a moment when Confederate authority and discipline; civilian confidence and loyalty; tension between local, state, and Confederate authorities; and the roles played by women and African Americans had reached critical turning points. Indeed, African Americans played major roles in the story; most escapees betrayed typical racist attitudes, and were at first almost completely unaware of the danger they posed to slaves or free blacks who aided them. At the same time, all of the successful escapees admitted that they would not have reached freedom without help from African Americans, and at least

some seemed to come to an understanding about the nuances of slavery and race relations.

Foote's book can be seen as a case study of just how the Confederacy unraveled during its last months. Indeed, the simple fact that so many men were able to escape reflected the disorder of the Confederate administration as the war reached its climax. Foote does not claim that the fugitives caused the Confederacy to collapse; rather, they were "heralds" of its imminent defeat. (20)

One particular passage demonstrates the chaos that the escapees helped to create: "Humans by the thousands were on the move in the Blue Ridge during the winter of 1864-1865. Escaped prisoners, refugees, recruits for the Union army. . . , Confederate deserters seeking sanctuary in Union lines, guerillas on the prowl, U. S. and Confederate raiders, and state militia units" created a virtual traffic jam of the frightened, the angry, the disaffected, the patriotic, and the desperate. (91)

Foote offers vivid details of this backcountry disorder and of southern society, beginning with the startlingly inexperienced, ignorant, helpless, and ineffective government officials scrambling to hold things together. Escapees could not distinguish between white and black voices in the dark, or between the shacks in which poor whites and free blacks lived. Slaves were emboldened to act less like slaves once they started encountering the Yankees skulking through the countryside. Throughout, readers come to understand the extent to which fugitives and southern civilians feared one another.

I have just two caveats. I would have liked to have seen more about the relationships formed between fugitives and southerners. Readers glimpse the sympathy and gratitude, disdain and contempt, trust and suspicion that were all reflected in the interactions between fugitives and southern civilians, but the vignettes suggest a rich history of sectional, gender, and racial relationships that would be fascinating to explore more deeply. Also, the epilogue seems a little rushed, and the relationship between the escapees and the 200,000 other Union prisoners seems undeveloped. Of course, Foote indicates that her focus is on the men who were seen as *threats* to the Confederacy, not on those scarecrow-thin *victims* in the horrific post-war photographs we have all seen. Yet all prisoners were included in a particularly important segment of the Union veteran community. I wonder how well the escapees were integrated into the larger body of prisoner-veterans. They were unique, but sometimes Foote seems to suggest

that they were representative. It seems to be a missed chance to fit them into the larger prisoner of war and veteran experiences.

Despite these comments—which are really less criticisms than suggestions for sequels!—this is an excellent book. In addition to its vigorous writing style and extensive research, the many strengths of *The Yankee Plague* include the unique vantage point it offers to the internal collapse of the Confederacy’s bureaucracy, military infrastructure, and morale; the reasons for widespread disaffection among war-weary southerners; and the complex interaction of race, gender, and politics on the Confederate frontier. As Foote writes in her introduction, the conditions she describes show that the end of the Civil War was a “process,” not a date on the calendar, and the stories she tells demonstrate that “amid the grand upheavals that ended the war, individuals struggled to survive, learned to see the world in new ways, and clung to what they knew before the conflict started.” (4) By bringing order to the chaos that was the Confederate backcountry, *The Yankee Plague* depicts that “process” in an original and humane way.

James Marten is professor and chair of the history department at Marquette University. His most recent books are Sing Not War: The Lives of Union and Confederate Veterans in Gilded Age America (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2011) and America’s Corporal: James Tanner in War and Peace (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014). He can be reached at james.marten@marquette.edu.