

Bloody Engagements: John R. Kelso's Civil War

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Review

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Kelso, John R. and Ed. Grasso, Christopher. *Bloody Engagements: John R. Kelso's Civil War*. Yale University Press, \$35.00 ISBN 9780300210965

The Many Lives of John R. Kelso

John R. Kelso led an unusual and tumultuous life: Methodist minister, later atheist, schoolteacher, enlisted man, spy, cavalry officer, master of hairbreadth escapes, and finally writer. This three-times married, bookish, opinionated, intrepid, and volatile man is a character perhaps worthy of a movie script, and thanks to the expert editing of Christopher Grasso, readers can enjoy and learn from the Civil War-related portions of a much larger autobiography.

In the genre of Civil War memoirs, *Bloody Engagements* stands out for its forceful language, evocative descriptions, and often slashing commentary. It focuses on John Kelso's service in Missouri and Arkansas with a home guard outfit, then with the 24th Missouri Volunteer Infantry, and later in the Missouri State Militia Cavalry. In 1882, Kelso began writing a very lengthy autobiography--in fact the section on the Civil War era published here begins on page 708 of the manuscript. From the outset, Kelso jumps into his subject with a passion. "Mild men became fierce, and fierce men became almost fiendish," was his vivid recollection of the immediate reaction to secession. People of all classes and occupations, women and children, all became caught up in the frenzied excitement, and a religious element only added to the blood lust. Kelso himself was a fanatical Unionist who from the outset boldly and publicly denounced secession as treason; not an especially modest fellow, he noted how his brave stance (and continuous baiting of secessionist neighbors) caused his status to rise with other men and loyal people more generally.

Kelso apparently impressed his superiors with his dedication and fearlessness, eventually advancing to the rank of major. Spying and other irregular missions were his forte. Sometimes he had to pretend to be a loyal Confederate, even to the point of giving a proslavery speech. He recounts a

number of verbatim and occasionally lengthy conversations, an always rather suspect feature in a memoir, but there is no denying Kelso has a certain talent for spinning a tale with dramatic flair. In the fall of 1861, his own house was burned down by Confederate troops, and he soon managed to wreak vengeance on them in Buffalo, Missouri. He writes movingly of refugees trudging through snow and, after describing their plight, questions whether God is present in such a situation and rails against the spectacle of supposed Christians slaughtering each other. During various campaigns and missions, Kelso was often away from home and his second wife apparently had an adulterous affair with a smooth-talking doctor, though the couple did not finally divorce until nearly a decade after the war.

Aside from commenting on his own travails and the general horrors of both conventional and guerrilla warfare, Kelso offers detailed accounts of several skirmishes along with stinging commentary on the derelictions of certain officers. In any early 1863 fight at Springfield, Missouri, he lay among the wounded to overhear Confederate plans, played dead in a cart that was hauling away bodies, and barely managed to elude watchful rebel guards. Kelso describes some destructive Union forays into Arkansas, though he generally distances himself from any mistreatment of civilians. He has little good to say about any Confederates, including women whom he almost always describes as “coarse.”

Indeed, his hatred of the enemy often appears unremitting, and this carried over into his political career. In 1864 running as an “independent Republican,” he won a tight and disputed congressional race during which he reveled in undoubtedly embellished tales of having slain twenty or more rebel “bushwhackers.” Once in office, he joined the radical faction in the House and was one of the earliest proponents for impeaching President Andrew Johnson. Two postwar speeches that Grasso includes as appendices reveal a man still denouncing rebels in the most bitter terms, abandoning his earlier support for colonizing African Americans, pushing for black suffrage, and ridiculing fears of miscegenation. Serving but one term in Congress, Kelso eventually moved to California where he remained an outspoken radical and atheist. Disillusioned with the results of the Civil War, toward the end of his life, he expressed deep regret over his service. When he died in 1892 he left behind an incomplete work, “Government Analyzed” that claimed the war had not improved the lot of African Americans and that the Union had not been worth saving.

Bloody Engagements presents a life filled with drama, conflict, and no little sadness; its often breakneck pace and pungent observations make for lively reading. Grasso's fine introduction, superb editing, helpful chronology, and useful index greatly add to the value of John Kelso's memoir for researchers and general readers alike.

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