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Interview

CWBR AUTHOR INTERVIEW RELUCTANT REBELS: THE CONFEDERATES WHO JOINED THE ARMY AFTER 1861

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Interview with Dr. Kenneth W. Noe, Professor of History at Auburn University

Interviewed by Nathan Buman

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Civil War Book Review (CWBR): I'm here today with Kenneth Noe, author of *Reluctant Rebels: The Confederates Who Joined the Army after 1861*. Professor Noe, thank you for joining me.

Kenneth Noe (KN): I'm happy to be here Nathan.

CWBR: You suggest, in your introduction, that Confederate soldiers who joined the army after the initial enlistment wave in 1861, including later enlisters, substitutes, and conscripts, remain an understudied group in Civil War scholarship. How did you choose to focus your study on the later enlisters instead of the substitutes or conscripted soldiers?

KN: Well, that's a long story and probably has two parts. In terms of studying later enlisters in general, it really goes back to 2002 when I was a commentator for a session on the Civil War at the Library of Congress. At that time Joe Glatthaar had given a paper on why soldiers fought and really summed up very nicely the literature that was out there on the whole question of soldier motivation as we have come to call it. And I was actually in a bit of a pickle for a while because Joe's paper was so good that I wasn't sure exactly what I was going to be able to say as commentary. But it did strike me as I read the paper again that there was an interesting problem in the literature that we had overlooked, that most of the research that had been done on Civil War soldiers on why they

fought and why they stayed really focused on those who had enlisted early in the war and who had remained with the regiments for as long as possible and generally they were in the so-called fighting regiments that we talk about. I suggested that day in Washington that, if we wanted a fuller picture of the Civil War soldier experience, we really to look at the conscripts and substitutes but also the men who enlisted later in the war. Almost a quarter of the men who fought in the Confederate Army did not enlist in 1861; they enlisted later. And while some of them certainly were young in 1861, although enough men lied about their age and enlisted anyway, most of the three-quarters were not, they could have enlisted right after Fort Sumter and I was really curious as to why they did not. In terms of why the book ended up focusing on later enlisters more than conscripts and substitutes, that's actually more of a research question more than anything else. I really wanted to get into their thoughts and that meant reading letters and diaries rather than looking at other source of material that could help us to get to people who did not leave those written records. I also wanted to focus on material that was written during the war; I was a little suspicious of things that would have been written in Reconstruction or Redemption or thereafter. And what that left me with was a research base with quite a few later enlisters, although not as many as I had expected to find, but very few conscripts and substitutes. I think one of the issues we'll have to deal with as we move forward and try to understand conscription and substitution more is that we just don't seem to have many written records, letters and diaries in which these men express their thoughts so we're going to have to approach them through means other than the ones I used.

CWBR: You mention your methodology; you state your desire to use letters written by soldiers during the war instead of those post-1865 Reconstruction or Redemption accounts. How does this choice shape your study and how might the later, more traditional sources have altered your study.

KN: Well I've worked with those later sources throughout my career and they're certainly useful for many things. In terms of trying to understand how people thought at a given moment I tend to be suspicious of materials that appear 20, 30, 40 years after the war. I'll give you an example actually from a different book that I've done. Years ago I edited the Civil War memoirs of a Union soldier from middle Tennessee. His name was Marcus Woodcock; he fought in the 9th Kentucky Infantry. And really before the war was over, in 1865 after his regiment was mustered out, he came home and started writing his memoir, and got all the way up to the Atlanta campaign before he stopped, and part of that

memoir includes a discussion of his first battle. That was at Stone's River. He describes at one point the death of his best friend a man named James Tooley and he's very insistent in this 1865 document that Tooley never saw it coming. There was no discussion of "what would happen if I die," certainly Tooley never came out and said "I've had this premonition that I will not survive the battle." Woodcock was very insistent that that did not happen. Years later, towards the end of his life, I want to say 1911 (I should have gone back and checked the date but I think 1911) he started to rewrite that memoir again. And when he got to the Stone's River portion he was very insistent that James Tooley had foreseen his own death and had discussed it the night before the battle. Well this was something that he absolutely denied right after the war. Now why did Marcus Woodcock in 1911 believe that his friend had had this premonition? I don't think he was a liar; this was a man who spent most of his adult life after the war working for the Baptist Church in Tennessee. But I think after reading all of his accounts of soldier premonitions over the years, Woodcock had come to convince himself that his friend Tooley had had one. If I relied on that 1911 document instead of the 1865 document I would have a very different view of the death of James Tooley and that's why in this book, in *Reluctant Rebels*, because I was really interested in trying to understand how they felt at the moment of enlistment, when they first got in the camp, when they first went into battle, I was suspicious of those later recounts simply because I wondered how many of them would have the equivalence of the premonition of the death of James Tooley as part of a narrative.

CWBR: On page 7, you quote James McPherson who said that the "prototypical unwilling soldier" was a nonslaveholding Southern married farmer with small children who was drafted in 1862 or enlisted to avoid being drafted." How would you change this statement or how would you summarize your findings based on the sampling of 320 soldiers. Is it possible to describe the prototypical unwilling soldier in the Confederate Army?

KN: Statistically half of them were not married. Statistically many of them were not farmers. I was surprised to find the numbers of not farmers in the sample. I did not find a great deal of evidence that they enlisted because of the bounty. Now some men did clearly enlist because of the bounty (I would say roughly around 11 percent) but most of them offered no evidence of that's why they had enlisted in 1862 or 1863. There's not a lot of evidence of men who enlisted because they thought they were about to get drafted so they did so; you could count them on one hand in my sample. What I discovered were men who

enlisted for a variety of other reasons: ideology to a certain extent but, again, not as much as I anticipated; men who enlisted more, I think, because they had by 1862 come to see the Union Army as a threat to their livelihood, a threat to their homes, literally a threat to their farms, their livestock, their slaves if they were slave owners, a threat to their family. Once they had come to the conclusion that the Union Army was coming to their state, perhaps coming to their county, prepared to deprive them of everything they had worked for in their adult life, that's when they start to enlist. So on that point, I do disagree with Dr. McPherson, although I think he's right about men who enlisted earlier in the war in terms of importance of ideology and comradeship and so forth. I just don't think that description carries over when we start talking about these later enlisters as a separate cohort.

CWBR: You mention these people who enlist when the northern army arrives in their area and you mention the ideology and sort of the different things that encouraged them to enlist. It seems to me that it is very difficult to pin down a broad description of these later enlisters. Could you maybe argue that these later enlisters were representative of a cross-section of southern society as a whole?

KN: Well I think if we compare them to those that we have been reading about, if we compare them to earlier enlisters, I think it's safer to say that they were less ideological, they were less motivated by the spread eagle speeches that were going around in 1860 and 1861. They were certainly locally oriented. Now that's true of southern society in general; it's a very localist society in 1860 but their localism, their attachment to kin and neighborhood strikes me as particularly strong. In terms of being a cross-section and certainly in terms of age they run across the spectrum. I discovered many more slaveholders in this cohort than I expected. In fact, the number of slaveholders in my samples is almost exactly the same figure as slave holding families would have been in the Confederacy as a whole. So, to that extent, they do reflect the region as a whole but I find them to be, in comparison to those who went before them, less ideological and more local. They have less of a sense of country or nationhood than those men who enlisted in the summer of 1861.

CWBR: How difficult was it, then, to designate or pin down a specific reason for any one soldier's enlistment. Were there any common themes throughout or was it just simply certain soldiers mentioning over and over the reasons for their enlistment? And, broadly then, do you see general themes

coming out in these letters across the 320 when they are talking about family or war experience? What sort of things, outside of reasons for enlistment were they concerned with in their letters?

KN: It was difficult; in fact it sort of became an issue at my house. We'd have guests over and people would ask me what I was writing about and I would tell them I was writing about Confederate soldiers and they always wanted to know more and I found it was really difficult to explain the book. It seemed to take me several minutes to go through all the permeations of what it was and what it wasn't and what I was trying to do. So, in that sense, I think it was difficult when it came down to actually trying to identify a thesis that I could explain easily. One thing I did, in terms of trying to come to grips with these men, is that I wanted to count. I think it's easy to go through sources from this period or any period and find the things that we are looking for and emphasize those and perhaps de-emphasize others. We've had historians, John Lynn comes to mind, Joe Glatthaar again comes to mind, who suggest that we need to be fairly rigorous with our research, that we need to actually count and compare. So what I did was come up with a rubric of various things that I might expect to find, I added and subtracted as I went along, and I started counting in terms of how many men mention any sort of political ideology; how many men write about their country; how many men compare the Confederate Revolution to the American Revolution; how many men talk about religion; how many men talk about slavery; how many men complain that they don't get their bounty. And when I had those figures and started to compare within the work certain patterns really started to develop. I found that well over a third of these men were writing about religion. I found that a little less than 20% ever mentioned political ideology and for most of them it was one mention, here I followed Gary Gallagher's rule that one mention is enough, and I think that's probably a fair argument. We don't know what they said in camp, we don't know how many letters were lost, but they're writing more about religion than ideology. They're writing more about home than anything else. They're writing home and they're concerned about how their wives and other family members are keeping the farms going. They're concerned about what might happen if the Union Army shows up. They're writing about their hatred of the enemy; there are almost as many who write about how much they hate the Yankees as who write about any sort of political ideology but when you look at that hatred even more what bothers them isn't northern politics as much as this notion of Union soldiers as vandals, as property thieves; they're going to come and take my slaves and my

livestock and my land and my senses and leave me a poor man. That's the issue that really crops up. So, in terms of doing these comparisons, I really did start to see patterns and more and more it struck me that these patterns were pointing back toward home even in areas that I did not expect. In looking at religion, for example, how many men did not participate in those great revivals that we are always reading about in the winters of 1862-1863 and 1863-1864. For so many of them their religious experience was taking place among their comrades in their messes or in their letters as they were writing back home still trying to maintain that position as head of family worship. Comradeship was certainly important but it was a comradeship that was with men from home, relatives, and kin and I was surprised to find that they seemed to have trouble making new bonds with men that they had met in the army. So again and again the numbers and the words as well were pointing me back toward home and away from what I think is the dominant interpretation right now of soldiers in general, which is that they were fighting for ideas.

CWBR: Let's talk about these ideas and the political ideology. What do your findings contribute to the long-time historical debate about Confederate nationalism? And I wonder how you might account for, it seems to me you suggest a stronger, more committed nationalism among the early enlisters in 1861 than we see later; you suggest that that nationalism did not wane and other scholars have suggested so. Why couldn't this Confederate nationalism build within these later enlisters as they spent more time in the army and among the veteran soldiers?

KN: Well it's an interesting question. It doesn't seem to. I think, like the soldiers that Jerry Prokopowicz talks about, their loyalty was more to company and to a certain extent regiment than it was to army or much less nation. They just don't write about nationalism that much; 61 out of my 320 mentioned any sort of political ideology but of those if you break it down, and bear in mind some men are in several categories because they are writing about 3 or 4 different things, I have about 10% who write about their country and as I said a few minutes ago most of them mention it once. I have 5 or 6 fervent nationalists who write a lot about their country but for most of them it's a passing phrase that pops up in a passage about something else. We've read that the American Revolution was tremendously important to the Civil War generation. Reid Mitchell was the first person who wrote about that and yet, out of my 320, only 9 of the men in my sample ever mentioned the American Revolution. Nine percent, 29 out of 320, mentioned independence as a goal, as a fact in some manner, and most of them

mentioned it once. Subjugation is a word that James McPherson pointed us to, this notion of being forced to knuckle under to the Lincoln administration and its political ideas including abolition. They don't write much about subjugation; I think I have 17 of them that mention the word once. And finally states rights, I mean growing up in Virginia I was taught year after year that Confederate soldiers had fought for states rights, not for other issues, and certainly not for slavery. But in fact out of my 320, I only had a dozen who ever mentioned anything that looked like states rights. These men were not nationalists; they weren't ideologists. I suspect (I can't prove it; I don't have enough men who write about why they did not enlist in 1861 to do more than suggest) but I think that it was that lack of political fervor, that lack of interest in those sorts of ideas that may have kept most of them out of the army when the war began. But as the war dragged on and as the Union Army became more of an immediate threat to their homes, their neighborhood, their livelihood, they were spurred to enlist.

CWBR: You spend a great deal of time talking about the later enlisters and how they viewed their comrades and how they viewed the veteran soldiers who had joined in 1861. I wonder if the early enlisters write about their opinions of later-enlisting comrades. Were they considered equal on the battlefield and in camp or were they something of a newcomer, not as dedicated to the cause.

KN: Well I tended to look at these issues from the later enlisters point of view. I really didn't spend a lot of time reading primary material from the earlier enlisters as they wrote about the new ones. I have looked at those sources for other projects from time to time and yeah I think there was a sense, in many cases, that these were men who were not as good as us, not as fervent as us. You know a lot of them are here for the bounty. These are expressions that I have seen in both in Union sources and in Confederate sources. The way the later enlisters saw it though, when they arrive in regiments they are arriving in most cases as men who know where they are going. They're coming to particular companies and regiments when they can and various legislation makes that possible for them where they know people. They are coming to this company and this regiment because their brother is there, or their neighbor is there, or somebody is there. And I suspect that these transitions into those units, to an extent that men going to brand-new regiments are certainly conscripts would not find when they came to the army. As far as the later enlisters saw, if they were just as good of soldiers as anyone else once they got there and they don't really write about being shunned or unwelcome.

CWBR: During your discussion of the widespread shift later in the book, the shift away from card playing and rabble rousing in the southern armies, these sorts of sinful acts as those morally-concerned soldiers call it. On page 133, you state that "what later enlisters now added to the mix was a pronounced family orientation that kept them mentally and spiritually connected to home." Is this shift away from these licentious acts, is that simply due to an increasing likelihood of older, married enlisters and the maturing of the veterans or is it just a general shift as the soldiers realized that war was not a party?

KN: Well in a way I think it's both. Yes in a way you are dealing with an older cohort; my men are a few years older than that average we always hear of 21 or 22 but I think that it's important to look at when they come to the army. When we read these accounts of how wild and crazy camp was, Steve Woodworth has done this beautifully, we're really looking at 1861 and 1862; we're looking at men coming to the war without really knowing what the battle is going to look like. My argument is that, by the time later enlisters start showing up in Confederate ranks in February-March of 1862, they're joining a veteran army that has already by itself, to an extent, gone through that transition. I mean yes there are some pious later enlisters who write about all the sinful acts they find in camp but I found a lot less of that than I expected and my sense is that the army itself, that army of earlier enlisters, had already made that transition because of the combat experience that had sobered them up. So later enlisters, yes they're older men, but they're also arriving in, to an extent, more sober camps than those that had been in existence a year earlier. So to that extent the army was never as wild for them as I might have been for people who joined up.

CWBR: In part of the larger discussion of maturing of the forces, what caused the widespread shift toward religion that began in Stonewall Jackson's Corps in the Army of Northern Virginia and its subsequent spread westward? Was it, as some scholars have suggested a conscious desire for southerners to legitimize their cause and give it a moral foundation?

KN: Well I think there probably was some of that. For later enlisters, in particular, because they're the ones I know the best it was a lot more personal. I think it really was, these are men who had a hard time leaving home. By and large they did not want to be in the army. They did enlist, they were willing to fight, they were certainly literally willing to fight but they wanted the war to end. They loved to use that phrase "this cruel war." This was not a marvelous moment in their life, for most of them it was a terrible thing that happened; they wanted to

go home. When they got to the army they were faced with the reality of death: death in camp, death as a result of battle, they saw men dying, they saw their friend dying, they knew that they might not get home. And I think that shaped their religious response. If you go back to the time of the American Revolution, Americans (westerners in general) have a sort of vague sense of the afterlife. They're not really sure what heaven is going to look like. It's going to be good but there's no real sense of well it's going to be just like life on earth. For a lot of reasons during the Jacksonian period, by the time we get to 1860, there is a sense among American Protestants, North and South, that heaven is going to look a whole lot like home, that when a Christian dies and goes to heaven that man is going to live in a small nuclear household with his wife and with his kids if they too were saved and if they too were able to get to heaven and that life was going to go on pretty much as it had before only better. So what happens with a lot of these men is that they start using the same phrase over and over. They start writing their wives and their children to an extent and they say "let us meet in heaven, if we do not again meet on this earth, let us meet in heaven" and they spend a lot of time trying to convince their wives and their children to live good Christian lives. I think it was the ultimate way of getting home for men who weren't sure that they were going to get back to their earthly home in North Carolina or Alabama or wherever, there was still that hope that belief that their families would be reunited in a home in the afterlife. And so again for them religion tends to be very, very personal. They don't write very much at all about the Confederacy as a Christian nation, that they are Christian soldiers that they are fighting against godless abolition; I mean there are a very small number of them that do. Their religion for them I think it was for antebellum southerners as a whole was very personal and very, very family oriented and, to an extent, individual and that's really what drives their religious expression through the war.

CWBR: In summary then, do we have some sense of what happened to these 320 soldiers from your sample that you built your study around? Do you know how many died during the war? And I wonder how, I know you wanted to focus on their writings during the war, but I wonder how their post-war memories or reflections might have differed from their feelings during the war?

KN: It's a wonderful question. Those who survived, and some of them did, I mean how did they look back on the war 30 and 40 years later and that's probably another good study to be written but that's not something that I looked at. I wasn't interested in their memories so much as I was interested in their experience so I would certainly encourage anybody who wanted to take my sample and track

these men down in the published literature of the 1870s and 80s and 90s to see how they regarded the war experience. I think that would be interesting; it's not something that I did. A lot of my men died in the hospital. I was shocked at how many of them actually spent time in the hospital and, as I think is the case for every Civil War historian and as I think you are working through the collections of letters and diaries, there's always that moment when the collection ends and you know that the soldier has died and that happened a lot, you know they are writing these letters from hospitals "I think I'm getting better" when in fact they weren't. The memory question is an interesting one and it certainly memory is certainly something I've been interested in over the years but it's not something that I did with this project. What I really wanted to do was make a contribution to the soldier motivation literature that we have out there and in the same way that say McPherson did not look at their memories 30 or 40 years later or Chandra Manning didn't look at those I didn't either what I was really trying to do was fit my work into that literature.

CWBR: Professor Noe, thank you for joining me and discussing your most recent book, *Reluctant Rebels: The Confederates Who Joined the Army after 1861*.

KN: Thank you; I enjoyed it.