

The Notorious "Bull" Nelson: Murdered Civil War General

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Review

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Clark, Donald A. *The Notorious "Bull" Nelson: Murdered Civil War General.* Southern Illinois University Press, \$29.95 ISBN 978-0-8093-3011-3

A Deeper Look at a Civil War General

This is the first book-length biography of Union Major General William "Bull" Nelson, who is remembered more for the manner of his death than for his achievements in life. At the age of thirty-eight, on September 29, 1862, he was shot and killed in the Galt House in Louisville by Union General Jefferson C. Davis. Donald Clark, who wrote the article on Nelson in the *Encyclopedia of Northern Kentucky* (2009), conducted extensive research that reveals new perspective and new details on Nelson's death and particularly on his career in the U.S. Navy before the Civil War, a subject which has been relatively unexplored. Clark describes Nelson as a victim of bullying who reacted by becoming a life-long bully himself; Clark's chapter on Nelson's childhood and education is entitled, "The Roots of Imperfection" Nelson was born on September 27, 1824, in Maysville, Kentucky, and his father, Dr. Thomas W. Nelson, a physician, decided that Nelson should receive a military education, upholding the family honor with a military career (1). Therefore, when Nelson was thirteen years old, his father enrolled him in Norwich University, a private military school in Vermont modeled after West Point. Nelson was scarred by the ritualistic hazing, and when, at the age of fifteen, he began four years of service at sea with the navy, the abusive treatment continued and he entered adulthood fully developed as a bully. When he was twenty years old, he enrolled in the new Naval Academy at Annapolis, and the cadets nicknamed him "Bully" Nelson.

Graduating from the Naval Academy, Nelson returned to sea duty, and while he had courage, loyalty, and dedication to duty, he was a tyrant and a profane braggart. In the Mexican War, he was awarded a ceremonial sword for his bravery in the siege of Vera Cruz and in the Tabasco expedition. When Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated, Nelson was serving as an ordnance officer in

the Navy Yard in Washington, D.C. He became friends with Lincoln, and the president was impressed with Nelson's intelligence, courage, and his interest in Kentucky politics. Nelson was six feet, four inches tall and weighed about 300 pounds. When he suggested that a secret agent should deliver rifles to Union recruits who could be enlisted in neutral Kentucky, Lincoln asked him if he knew anyone who would have the courage to carry out such a mission. "Cast your eyes on a little man of my size," Nelson replied (48).

Lincoln sent him to Louisville to report on whether Kentucky could be retained in the Union, and Nelson reported that the state legislature was loyal and the state could be held. When he returned to Washington, the administration gave him 5,000 "Lincoln Guns" to deliver to Kentucky recruits. This was a very delicate assignment that risked driving Kentucky out of the Union, but Nelson carried out his assignment delicately and without mentioning Lincoln's direct involvement. He was detached from the navy, appointed Brigadier General, and placed in charge of recruiting. Discreetly, he waited until after the state election in August 1861 to establish the training facility at Camp Dick Robinson. After Kentucky declared for the Union, he led a successful military expedition into the Big Sandy Valley in Eastern Kentucky, winning the battle of Ivy Mountain. He successfully commanded his division at the battle of Shiloh and was promoted to Major General. When the Confederate invasion of Kentucky began in the fall of 1862, he was placed in command of the green Union troops defending the state, and they were decisively defeated in the battle of Richmond, Kentucky.

Union General Mahlon D. Manson was field commander at Richmond, and Nelson blamed him for retreating in the first two phases of the battle. For the third stand, in the Richmond cemetery, Nelson arrived and attempted to rally the men by shouting: "Boys, if they can't hit something as big as I am, they can't hit anything" (135). At that moment, a bullet struck him in the thigh and he had to flee along with the men. Clark gives Nelson credit for bravery during his tenure as an army general and for attempting to keep his abusive nature in check. But the strict discipline that he had learned aboard ship was unsuitable for Civil War volunteers on land. He was known among his officers and men as a tyrannical brute. One of his officers wrote to his wife: "He is coarse, savage, tyrannical, and continually insulting everyone with his bits of blasphemy" (81). The officer later softened his evaluation of Nelson, but men in the ranks had little opportunity to observe Nelson's more gentle side.

Nelson and his force withdrew to Louisville and there, over and over again, he insulted General Davis. Nelson told Davis that he was unfit for command and ordered him out of Louisville. On the day of the shooting, in the Galt House, when Davis demanded an apology, Nelson called him a coward and Nelson told a bystander that he would teach Davis a lesson. Davis was never prosecuted for the shooting, and Clark agrees with the traditional interpretation that most men in the Union army and most informed civilians believed that Nelson got what he deserved. Clark calls the shooting cold-blooded murder, but his narrative emphasizes two interesting themes. First, he stresses that Davis was not only defending his personal honor, but that of his home state of Indiana as well. Nelson had insulted the Indiana soldiers more than once and had blamed the defeat at Richmond on them. Second, Clark suggests that Davis may have acted in self-defense under the belief that Nelson was heading toward his hotel room to fetch his pistol and teach Davis the threatened lesson. Clark concludes that even though Nelson was later recognized by the naming of Camp Nelson in his honor, he failed to achieve greatness because he "failed to master the art of grace under pressure" (166).

James A. Ramage, Regents Professor of History at Northern Kentucky University, is co-author with his daughter, Andrea S. Watkins, of the forthcoming book, Kentucky Rising: Freedom, Slavery, and Culture from the Early Republic to the Civil War, scheduled for publication by the Kentucky Historical Society and the University Press of Kentucky in October 2011.