

I Am Perhaps Dying: The Medical Backstory of Spinal Tuberculosis Hidden in the Civil War Diary of LeRoy Wiley Grishman

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Review

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Rasbach, Dennis. *I Am Perhaps Dying: The Medical Backstory of Spinal Tuberculosis Hidden in the Civil War Diary of LeRoy Wiley Grisham.* Savas Beatie/Casemate Publishers, \$13.99 ISBN 9781611214505

This volume is a companion piece to *The War Outside My Window. The Civil War Diary of LeRoy Wiley Gresham, 1860-1865*. Invalid teenager Leroy Wiley Gresham left a seven-volume diary spanning the years of secession and the Civil War (1860-1865). He was just 12 when he began and he died at 17, just weeks after the war ended. His remarkable account, recently published as *The War Outside My Window: The Civil War Diary of LeRoy Wiley Gresham, 1860-1865*, edited by Janet E. Croon (2018), spans the gamut of life events that were of interest to a precocious and well-educated Southern teenager, including military, political, religious, social, and literary matters of the day. This alone ranks it as an important contribution to our understanding of life and times in the Old South. But it is much more than that. Chronic disease and suffering stalk the young writer, who is never told he is dying until just before his death.

Dr. Rasbach, a graduate of Johns Hopkins medical school and a practicing general surgeon with more than three decades of experience, was tasked with solving the mystery of LeRoy's disease. Like a detective, Dr. Rasbach peels back the layers of mystery by carefully examining the medical-related entries. Rasbach looks at LeRoy's symptoms; the medicines the doctors prescribed for him. What course did the disease take, month after month, year after year and what treatments did LeRoy receive? Dr. Rasbach ably explores these and other issues in *I Am Perhaps Dying* to conclude that the agent responsible for LeRoy's suffering and demise turns out to be *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, a tiny but lethal adversary of humanity since the beginning of recorded time.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, tuberculosis, or consumption as it was then called, was the deadliest disease in the world, accounting for one-third of all deaths. Even today, a quarter of the world's population is infected with TB, and the disease remains one of the top ten causes of death, claiming 1.7 million lives annually, mostly in poor and underdeveloped countries.

In detailing the decline and fall of the Old South, LeRoy was also recording his own demise from spinal TB or Pott's Disease. These five years of detailed entries make LeRoy's diary a unique account, and possibly the only one from a nineteenth century TB patient. In addition to recording his medical condition and treatment, LeRoy also recorded his thoughts and reactions to secession, war, family life, slavery, and the South's

fluctuating prospects.

LeRoy's diary offers an inside look at a fateful journey that robbed an energetic and likeable young man of his youth and life. *I Am Perhaps Dying* adds considerably to the medical literature by increasing our understanding of how tuberculosis attacked a young body over time, how it was treated in the middle nineteenth century, and the effectiveness of those treatments. Dr. Rasbach covers such topics as the history of TB, Pott's Disease, the medical care that was available during the Civil War and, specifically, to LeRoy. He includes a Chronicle of Consumption with commentary. Finally, Rasbach includes a decent bibliography and index for further study.

I Am Perhaps Dying gives the reader a great insight into the medical conditions of LeRoy Grisham. Written so a layperson could understand, it is easily understandable and evokes sympathy in the reader for the young and doomed patient. One can envision the analogy of the Confederacy in young LeRoy's struggles.

In addition to being a practicing surgeon, Dr. Rasbach is the author of *Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain and the Petersburg Campaign: His Supposed Charge from Fort Hell, his Near-Mortal Wound, and a Civil War Myth Reconsidered*.

Peter J. D'Onofrio, Ph. D. received his Doctorate from LaSalle University. He is the president of The Society of Civil War Surgeons and editor of The Journal of Civil War Medicine. Dr. D'Onofrio can be contacted at socwsurgeons3560@gmail.com.