

Crossing the Deadlines: Civil War Prisons Reconsidered

Angela M. Riotto

Army University Press, angelamriotto@gmail.com

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Review

Riotta, Angela M.

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In the volume's foreword, John T. Hubbell, professor emeritus at Kent State University, succinctly summarized the historiography of Civil War prisons, remarking, "It seems that prisons and prisoners have been...a part of the narrative, yet somehow strangely apart from it." Seeking to remedy this disconnect, Michael P. Gray, author of *The Business of Captivity: Elmira and its Civil War Prisons* (2001), tasked eight scholars to "reconsider" Civil War prisons and prisoners of war (POWs) and scholars' interpretations of the topic. The result, *Crossing the Deadlines: Civil War Prisons Reconsidered*, is an enlightening essay collection that highlights the latest methodologies and interdisciplinary approaches to the topic of Civil War imprisonment and its place in the war's narrative and public memory of the conflict.

Gray begins *Crossing the Deadlines* with a detailed review of the historiography. In the introduction, Gray traces the scholarship to William Best Hesseltine's groundbreaking *Civil War Prisons: A Study in War Psychology* (1930)—which is still a prerequisite for those studying Civil War prisons. Gray then dissects *Civil War Prisons* (1972)—a result of Hesseltine's own mission to offer a balanced interpretation of the topic. First published in 1962 as a special issue in the *Civil War History* journal and republished by Kent State University, the collection included essays from experts on Civil War military prisons, including Ovid L. Futch, James I. Robertson, and Frank L. Byrne. Not only did Hesseltine's collection serve as a corrective to imbalanced assessments of Civil War prisons, but it also serves as the foundation for Gray's volume. After taking his readers back in time, Gray then explains the current state of the field. Gray's easy-to-read and informative introduction simultaneously educates the reader on the historiography and proves, before even getting to the essays, that this volume is a must-read for those interested in Civil War prisons and POWs.

Cognizant that the various interdisciplinary approaches and interpretations may overwhelm the reader, Gray organizes the collection into three parts, each with three essays. Evan Kutzler's essay opens the volume with an environmental history. Trained in utilizing a "sensory approach"—analysis of the five senses and what they reveal about the historical record—Kutzler offers a dual interpretation of Civil War prisons and the environment. First, he argues that understandings of (or lack thereof) the environment, disease, and sanitation informed prison officials' decisions. Second, he argues that the environment cannot be separated from the human experience. In reconsidering the "causality" and the "hybridity" of the environment and military prisons, Kutzler establishes that an environmental history approach can enhance scholars' examinations of the POW lived experience. Gray also contributes to the collection and takes readers outside the prison walls to analyze the visitors to Civil War prisons. As prisoners struggled to survive on the inside, civilians engaged in "dark tourism" on the outside. By analyzing this morbid tourist venture, Gray reveals that studies of Civil War prisons cannot be limited to happenings inside the stockades. Not ready to cross the deadline just yet, however, Angela Zombek concludes the first section with analysis of Catholic priests and their actions within military prisons. Religion served as a coping mechanism for many as they struggled to come to terms with their suffering; and although the majority of POWs were Protestant, Zombek finds that Catholic priests often received a warm welcome upon entering the prisons. By entering prisons, some even becoming prisoners in the process, Catholic priests not only advanced the teachings of the Church, but shaped Union and Confederate prison policies.

The second section covers a variety of topics: retaliation, race, and the repressed. Lorien Foote's article serves as a transition piece between the sections, by examining the concept of using prisoners as tools of retaliation. Foote argues that retaliation policy shaped military doctrine and campaigns, to be sure, but in the process it relegated captured individuals to faceless, nameless weapons of war. Although more interested in policy, Foote introduces the question of POWs' identity and status—a theme that continues throughout the section. Continuing this discussion, Christopher Barr, an interpreter with the National Park Service, turns our attention to African Americans, more specifically their identity as soldiers, slaves, and freedpeople and their place in the imprisonment narrative. Just like the environment in Kutzler's essay, Barr argues that race cannot be ignored when it comes to Civil War captivity, as it both shaped policy and the experiences of the individuals involved. Analyzing another aspect of the

African American experience, Kelly Mezurek concludes the section with a discussion of the U.S. Colored Troops as Union prison guards. For the most part, historians have paid little attention to prison guards, often presenting them as flat, undisciplined characters. Mezurek, however, shows that this is too simplistic of an assessment; and in actuality, African American guards had proved themselves in combat and were often more qualified than others. To continue to describe them as uncivilized brutes, according to Mezurek, only propagates white supremacists' depictions, thus ignoring their wartime achievements.

In his attempt to add further nuance to the imprisonment narrative, Gray invited two archeologists, David Bush and John K. Derden, to discuss what the physical sites of Civil War prisons can tell us about wartime captivity. In the volume's final section, Bush takes us to Johnson's Island. By revealing archeological findings from the prison hospital, Bush demonstrates how archeology can provide deeper understanding of POW life and prison policy. For Bush, literally digging into the latrines around the hospital uncovers a story of suffering that corroborates POWs' claims of neglect. Derden also went digging into a former prison site—Camp Lawton—but into its history and place in public memory. By detailing the camp's history, how it was “lost,” and eventually remembered as part of the war's history, Derden demonstrates that POWs' stories are not the only ones that need to be unearthed—so do their prison pens.

Derden's examination of Camp Lawton would have been a strong enough ending to this volume, but Benjamin Cloyd, author of *Haunted by Atrocity: Civil War Prisons in American Memory* (2010), provides an incredible conclusion with an assessment of Civil War prisons and their place in the reconciliation scholarship. For him, as for other essayists in the collection, prisons and POWs defy simple explanations and easy narrative. Furthermore, such simplicity cannot be applied to war remembrance and reconciliation. As he succinctly concludes, the existence of the volume testifies to the numerous possibilities and multiple approaches to Civil War prisons and POWs; and scholars must be ready to reconsider even the basic of notions.

By inviting historians, both academic and public, and archeologists to offer new interpretations of Civil War imprisonment, Gray's volume adds substantially to the historiography and sheds light on the many possibilities for future study. Unfortunately, in his attempt to showcase the latest trends and methodologies, the volume can seem a bit disjointed. For example, although Gray splits the volume into three parts by theme, the essays do not always flow from one to another. However, the reader can forgive this slight shortcoming and appreciate

the diverse approaches and analyses. Not only will professional historians enjoy this volume, but it also lends itself to use in a graduate seminar as an excellent example of a literature review and state of the field assessment.

Angela M. Riotto received her Ph.D. from the University of Akron in May 2018. She is currently working as a Historian with Army University Press's Documentary Team in Fort Leavenworth, KS. She is currently working on four anthology chapters, one of which will appear in Enduring War: New Perspectives on Civil War Veteranhood, edited by Brian Matthew Jordan (under contract with Louisiana State University Press).