

James Riley Weaver's Civil War: The Diary of a Union Cavalry Officer and Prisoner of War, 1863-1865

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Review

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Schlotterbeck, John T. and Wesley W. Wilson, Midori Kawaue, and Harold A. Klingensmith eds. *James Riley Weaver's Civil War: The Diary of a Union Cavalry Officer and Prisoner of War, 1863-1865*. Kent State University Press, 2019 \$38.58 ISBN 9781606353684

"A prospect of propositions being proposed . . ."

One of the things asked of any new historical publication is that it deal with historiography and suggest proof of necessary change. *James Riley Weaver's Civil War* meets that requirement by adding substantially to the source literature on military prisoners. Most assume that when President Lincoln issued his new policy concerning the issue of African-American soldiers and their white officers (General Order No. 252, issued July 31, 1863), he also ended the exchange of all prisoners of war. Paroles had proved ineffective on both sides, and the Confederacy insisted on treating black soldiers in a much different manner than white soldiers. Points of contention included execution for the white officers responsible for black soldiers and the Confederacy's legal commitment to enslaving any African-American soldiers they captured. Within three weeks, the Union War Department halted the parole and exchange of officers. Weaver himself, a 23-year-old white cavalry officer in the Army of the Potomac, found himself affected by these circumstances even though he was not personally involved in any of the affected areas. These are the circumstances under which Weaver composed the diary entries catalogued by the editors.

The story behind the diary itself is fascinating. Began as a transcription project by independent scholar Tony Klingensmith, the manuscript found itself in the hands of three others: Wesley Wilson—the coordinator of archives and special collections at Depauw University, Midori Kawaue—a doctoral student in history at Princeton, and John T. Schlotterbeck—the A. W. Crandall Professor of History, Emeritus, at Depauw University. A summer research grant,

from Depauw, provided the time and money needed for collaboration on the manuscript, and the result is a complete 666 consecutive-day diary of an educated, religious young cavalry officer from Pennsylvania. James Weaver joined the 18th Pennsylvania cavalry, as a private, in October 1862. At the time of his capture, he had earned promotion to first lieutenant. Every evening he made an entry about his day in a small, leather-bound diary. These usually ended in a cryptic comment about his health, which was almost always "tolerably good."

All was good for Lt. Weaver until October 11, 1863, when he was captured during an engagement near Brandy Station. Even the inconvenience of now being a prisoner of war did not stop Weaver from his diary entries. Within two days he was incarcerated in Libby Prison along with about 900 other Union officers. Weaver's daily entries, from this point onward, concentrate on his eternal hope to be freed through an increasingly dysfunctional prisoner exchange program.

Weaver spent nearly seventeen months in a series of Confederate prisons, enduring changes in weather, accommodations, and food. His eyewitness account gives readers a look at what an officer's detention was like, enhanced by the prefaces to each chapter. These provide the necessary details to put Weaver's experiences into context with the rest of the war. His observations are nearly always realistic, rarely becoming romanticized. His Methodist faith, and his practical nature, provided him with the strength to endure prolonged imprisonment. Still, compared to Elmira and Andersonville, an officer's prison was not nearly as trying. Officers enjoyed opportunities to leave prison to purchase food or gather wood or to walk through town in some cases. His relatively narrow life opens up as he meets men from "every class of society, high and low, rich and poor." He also comments about his Southern captors, noting the decay of order as the war became more difficult for the Confederacy. Weaver details the information he gathers from the constant stream of visitors (especially on Sundays), guards, new prisoners, recaptured escapees, and Southern newspapers.

As the South disintegrated before his eyes, Weaver remained flustered about prisoner exchanges. Rather than coming to a complete halt, as they mostly did for enlisted soldiers, officers were exchanged regularly even after Lincoln's proclamation. Exchange rumors kept every group of officers on the edge of expectation. Additionally, escaping from southern prisons was not too difficult, either. Men dug tunnels, bribed guards, and covered for each other during the roll calls which occurred several times a day. Although Weaver never tried to escape personally, he was supportive of the efforts of others.

Lt. Weaver endured much: sadness at holidays, no mail, and sickness. Still, he managed to retain his faith in both his Methodist religion and in his country. His confinement seems endless, and the reader cannot help but feel pity for such a predicament. And then, suddenly, it was over. Sunday, February 26, 1865, saw Weaver on a train to Wilmington. The final part of the diary concludes on April 1, 1865: "Remained at home most of the day. Having nothing of any importance to do, I got tired and lonely. The day was fine and felt happy."

In many ways, Weaver's diary reminds the reader of *All for the Union*, the journal of Elisha Hunt Rhodes. Both men were young, bright, and resilient. They met their challenges with spirit and faith. As each left the military behind, after a relatively short period of becoming accustomed to a less-regulated life, he tackled the next part of life with as much energy as he showed in the last part. Both men went on to become professionals in business and education, married and lived relatively long lives. They each joined the Grand Army of the Republic and were active in veterans' affairs for many years after the end of the Civil War.

This book, well-edited and easy to read, is essential because it delineates what prison was like for a Union officer. Much published work on military incarceration studies enlisted soldiers' experiences. These books emphasize the cruelty and thoughtlessness evident on both sides during the Civil War. As always, things are not as clear cut as they initially seem. The Civil War did not ruin every soldier's life. The enduring faith and confidence of Lt. Weaver during his time as a prisoner of war can help readers understand that the values of a young Yankee recruit from a middle-class Pennsylvania farm family helped him—like many others—find meaning and purpose—even in a Confederate prison.

Meg Groeling received her Master's Degree in Military History, with a Civil War emphasis, in 2016, from American Public University. Savas Beatie published her first book, The Aftermath of Battle: The Burial of the Civil War Dead, in the fall of 2015. Meg has written First Fallen: The Life of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth. She is a regular contributor to the blog Emerging Civil War.