

# Friendly Enemies: Soldier Fraternization throughout the American Civil War

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## Review

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**Thompson, Lauren K.** *Friendly Enemies: Soldier Fraternization throughout the American Civil War*. University of Nebraska Press, 2020. HARDCOVER. \$55.00 ISBN 9781496202451 240 pp

The image of Union and Confederate pickets meeting in the Rappahannock River to exchange coffee, tobacco and kind words has been indelibly etched into Civil War iconography. This scene has been perpetuated partially due to Hollywood portrayals like that in *Gods and Generals*. But how common were such meetings between soldiers who otherwise found themselves in one another's musket sights? In her concise and engaging book, *Friendly Enemies: Soldier Fraternization throughout the American Civil War*, Lauren K. Thompson has shown that not only were friendly meetings between enemy soldiers frequent, they held deep meaning for soldiers who used them as measures of agency in a war that often left them feeling powerless. Thompson has illustrated that soldier fraternization was more than just an act of humanity in a frequently inhumane war, and she has given serious scholarly attention to meetings that are often treated as entertaining but unimportant footnotes.

Drawing on the primary accounts of 150 Union and Confederate enlisted soldiers, noncommissioned officers, and junior officers from the western and eastern theaters of the war, Thompson's excellent research has created a vivid picture of how soldiers used fraternization as a form of resistance against the military structure that limited their autonomy. Subsequently, Thompson's chapters show that soldiers used fraternization to gather information, to engage in discourse with enemy soldiers about common experiences, to trade items that made soldiering more comfortable, and to negotiate ceasefires that gave momentary respites from fighting, especially during periods of sustained siege combat or intense campaigning such as during the Vicksburg and Overland campaigns. As Thompson has well illustrated, these areas of fraternization, often on picket lines, became semi-permeable boundaries and borderlands around

armies where agency and self-preservation were exercised by soldiers trying to survive harsh environmental conditions and brutal warfare.

Thompson has shown that the meetings of enemy soldiers occurred with the understanding that conversation would not dwell on sectional or political differences, but rather on the common miseries shared during soldier life. As volunteer soldiers left civilian lives where they had enjoyed a significant amount of self-determination and became cogs in often oppressive military machines, they frequently used forbidden fraternization to ease their material wants and to experience comradeship with enemy soldiers who sought to exercise similar agency against stringent military orders and watchful senior officers. While Thompson's argument that the grueling experiences of campaigning could transcend sectional differences to unite enemy soldiers who met on picket lines or during ceasefires is well-constructed, she could have explored this phenomenon a bit more thoroughly. Perhaps anecdotes describing men who were unwilling to set aside sectional differences to fraternize would have shown more clearly how those who could differed in experience. Additionally, Thompson's extensive use of manuscript collections and archival materials is apparent in the ample quotes that she provides throughout the book, but these at times are so prevalent that they distract from her excellent analysis. These are only minor issues, however, and they do nothing to detract from Thompson's excellent research that has shown that Civil War soldiers used fraternization as both a means of survival and a form of agency.

The brightest and most impactful portion of Thompson's work is her discussion of memory. As she so masterfully points out, the laying aside of sectional differences and war causes (specifically the issue of slavery) during fraternization placed the groundwork for Lost Cause narratives and reconciliatory veteran's meetings in the late-nineteenth century. Just as men focused on common valor during their fraternization in wartime, so too did they in later years. Most importantly, as Thompson has shown, African American soldiers were excluded from fraternization during the war, as white Confederates sought only to associate with enemies they considered soldier equals. The absence of African American soldiers from wartime fraternization carried forward into postwar narratives that sought to rectify sectional differences by venerating white soldier's experiences and ignoring causes of the war, all while forgetting the plight of hundreds of thousands of black soldiers. Thompson has excellently shown that the exclusion of black soldiers from fraternization, and the amicable meetings of white soldiers who set aside

sectional differences during picket line meetings, helped establish postwar narratives that often distorted the truth of the war.

Fraternization of enemy soldiers was more than a simple affair during the Civil War. It was used by soldiers to exercise agency and display acts of humanity during trying war years. In meetings that were forms of resistance and self-preservation, white soldiers also excluded black soldiers from events that would be used for a white-washed and racially exclusive narrative of reconciliation in postwar years. Lauren Thompson's book has wonderfully brought the meeting of enemy soldiers on picket lines and battlefields into full view and is an excellent first book from a young scholar. Anyone interested in the Civil War soldier experience and its lasting effects on war memory will find this book an invaluable resource.

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