

### The Bonds of War: A Story of Immigrants and Esprit de Corps in Company C, 9th Illinois Volunteer Infantry

Ryan Keating  
rkeating@csusb.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Keating, Ryan (2021) "The Bonds of War: A Story of Immigrants and Esprit de Corps in Company C, 9th Illinois Volunteer Infantry," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 23 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.23.3.06

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol23/iss3/6>

## Review

**Keating, Ryan W.**

**Summer 2021**

**Dretske, Diana L.** *The Bonds of War: A story of Immigrants and Esprit De Corps in Company C, 9<sup>th</sup> Illinois Volunteer Infantry.* Southern Illinois University Press, 2021. PAPERBACK. \$26.50 ISBN 9780809338207 pp 256.

Diana Dretske's *The Bonds of War* is an excellent example of the successful execution of what are, in my opinion, two of the most difficult types of studies to bring to fruition: the microhistory and the regimental history. Our archives and records, we know, are rife with tidbits and slivers of the past. Every scholar has found compelling stories in the archives that are, ultimately, incomplete and, thus, weaving together the lives of men and women in nuanced ways that provide readers insight to both the intimate history and broader place of these historical actors can be a daunting, if not impossible task. More often than not, those compelling stories we find tucked away in archival folders become anecdotes within larger historiographies because the paper trail grows cold long before we dare consider writing a micro history of that person. The same issues plague the writing of regimental histories. The study of the Civil War Era has progressed significantly in recent years marked, in part, by the transition away from the traditional regimental histories. As scholars such as Susannah Ural, Lorien Foote, and Stephen Ramold, have illustrated, it is impossible to disconnect the experiences of the citizen soldiers in Civil War armies from the social, political, and economic impacts of those in the army and on the home front. While nuanced discussions of battles and tactics are still useful, it is clear that these more traditional aspects of military history should occur in conjunction with, not disconnected from, analysis of the social history of these men and their communities. Yet, as I have found in my own work, this is often a difficult task. Though soldiers in the Civil War wrote often, their letters were not always preserved. Although James McPherson and scholars who followed in his footsteps have done an outstanding job of analyzing the motivations and experiences of soldiers at large, the fact is that soldiers were impacted as much by the local issues as they were by national ones, and the challenge for scholars moving forward, is to

recreate, to the best of our abilities, the worlds these men knew and occupied in order to truly gauge the impact of the Civil War on their lives and the lives of their loved ones. This can be an arduous task, though one, if done correctly, that can make significant contributions to our understanding of the far reach of America's bloodiest conflict.

I choose to preface my review of Diana Dretske's *The Bonds of War* in what I know is a rather long-winded manner because I believe the reader should be aware of just how difficult a task it must have been to write this book. Her work stands as an excellent example of both a microhistory of five friends and neighbors who enlisted and served together in the 96<sup>th</sup> Illinois Volunteer Infantry, and a social-military history of the unit itself. While the book is not perfect—indeed few are—it showcases the dynamic ways that scholars might utilize local history to better analyze the ways that men from across the nation experienced the Civil War.

The impetus for this book came from a tintype donated to the Lake County Historical Museum by the grandson of Edward Murray, a soldier in Company C of the 96<sup>th</sup> Illinois. Murray's four unknown companions became the subject of Dretske's attention as she sought to identify the soldiers and their stories. Through her research she found that, interestingly, all five were immigrants and had enlisted together in a regiment composed of men from two counties in Northern Illinois. The 96<sup>th</sup> Illinois was decidedly not ethnic in its regimental identity, and the decision of these five men to join that particular unit illustrates the bonds that existed and were cultivated between these men and their adopted local community, and the ways in which the war was a transcendent experience for men, regardless of their background. It is important that readers note that although these men were immigrants, their ethnicity had little, if any, bearing on their war-time experiences and Dretske does a fine job illustrating the importance of local community and the ways in which those at home and in arms were bound through the common connection of the war and military service.

The experiences of these volunteers naturally led to Dretske's larger effort to tell the story of Company C. The men of the 96<sup>th</sup> Illinois left their home state on October 8, 1862, and fought across the Western Theater, notably at Chickamauga, Atlanta, and Nashville. Dretske tells the regiment's history chronologically, from the unit's inception through muster out, but her narrative is a nuanced one, intimately connecting through her extensive research, the relationship between these soldiers from Illinois and broader social, political, and military issues. In doing so, she allows the reader to see the ways in which the experiences of these men were both similar to

and different from those of other soldiers. Important, for example, is the author's analysis of the anti-slavery sentiment that existed in Lake County in the years leading up to the war and the impact of these ideologies on the recruits—especially as they marched south and saw, firsthand, the evils of slavery. Dretske successfully carries the microhistory of the five men from Murray's photo across the war, interweaving their individual stories within the broader history and, in doing so, bolsters the narrative of an otherwise traditional regimental history.

Dretske's *The Bonds of War* suffers from two primary issues. First, because it flows chronologically, the author incorporated historical analysis throughout the book in order to contextualize events as part of the broader historiography of the war. Although this is useful for readers, it did come at the expense of, at times, a disrupted narrative. The second issue coincides with the first, primarily in regards to the fact that the historiography on the northern home front and America's citizen soldiers could have been hashed out in greater detail. There are similarities between the experiences that Dretske identifies among the men in the 96<sup>th</sup> Illinois and resonate with what Steven Ramold, Lorien Foote, Ricardo Herrera, and John Matsui (among others) have found in their own work. Here, the author could have made a stronger case for the contribution of her work the broader discussion on the importance of social-military analysis, because it does. These slight criticisms aside, *The Bonds of War* is an ambitious and well executed book that makes a positive contribution to the field of Civil War History and stands as an excellent example of the importance of the ways historians might utilize microhistory in expanding our understanding of this incredibly complex moment in American history.

*Ryan W. Keating is Professor of History at California State University, San Bernardino and author of Shades of Green: Irish Regiments, American Soldiers and Local Communities in the Civil War Era (Fordham University Press, 2017).*