

The Left-Armed Corps: Writings by Amputee Civil War Veterans

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Recommended Citation

Noe, Kenneth W. (2023) "The Left-Armed Corps: Writings by Amputee Civil War Veterans," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.25.1.12

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol25/iss1/12>

Review

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Winter 2023

Johnson, Allison M. *The Left-Armed Corps: Writings by Amputee Civil War Veterans*. Louisiana State University Press, 2022. PAPERBACK. \$40.00 ISBN 9780807177464 pp 390

One of the most welcome trends in recent Civil War scholarship involves historians expanding their interest in the lives and minds of soldiers to years well past Appomattox. The last decade especially saw several notable works on the postwar lives of veterans published. Unavoidably, the absence of the letters and diaries that undergird so much wartime soldier scholarship skews much of that new literature toward those veterans who experienced difficulties adjusting to peacetime and ended up leaving a paper trail in the newspapers or official documents. There, one encounters a host of veterans struggling with a spectrum of physical and mental issues as well as difficult readjustments: underemployment and unemployment, restlessness, bitterness, violence, amputations, chronic illnesses, pain, homelessness, alcoholism, drug dependency, commitment to mental institutions, and suicide. Historians vigorously debate whether veterans suffered post-traumatic stress, but clearly at least a minority came home with visible and invisible wounds.

Readers already conversant with that literature immediately will recall William Oland Bourn and his left-handed penmanship contests, which find a place in several recent works. Bourn was a prominent former chaplain and ardent social reformer who sought to encourage disabled veterans to develop employable skills. As the editor of *The Soldier's Friend* newspaper—which itself employed disabled men as agents—Bourn held two national penmanship contests in 1865 and 1867 for former Federal soldiers who had lost their right arms in a culture where teachers discouraged left-handedness even among those pupils so inclined. Although the rules evolved over time, 333 veterans submitted essays and poems designed to show off their skills in learning how to write well with the sinister hand. Displayed in New York and Washington, supported by the likes of U. S. Grant, William Tecumseh Sherman, and Philip Sheridan and judged by prominent men including poet William Cullen Bryant, Henry Bellows of

the U. S. Sanitary Commission, and Teddy Roosevelt's father, the winning entries received cash prizes. More significant to Bourn, presumably all the entrants would have developed a useful talent that only required one arm.

While previous scholars have both written about the contests and used the resulting essays as primary source material to tell larger stories, editor Allison M. Johnson in *The Left-Armed Corps* offers readers easy access to a lightly edited sample of the entries themselves. With increasingly little constraint from Bourn, the veterans included in the volume wrote about the war in its many aspects: enlistment, motivations, camp life, battle, politics, patriotism, how they lost their arms, and ultimately how the war transformed them and ideas about masculinity—which, before 1861, required two arms and two legs. Most of them were 1861 enlistees who remained privates. Some were immigrants; only two were African American. A great number went on to live long and productive lives—often using their left hands as clerks and bookkeepers—although some struggled and died young.

Those who wrote about their motivations almost exclusively stressed ideological reasons for joining the army, as opposed to the socio-economic causes that some historians cite. That ideology survived the war and, like scar tissue, hardened into a continuing hatred of the white South and a lack of interest in any national reunion except on northern terms. While their descriptions of battle and camp are typical enough, the narratives of their wounds and subsequent treatment are harrowing. In no other single volume will readers find so much about what it was like to be wounded on the field, taken to a hospital (if they did not walk there themselves), lose an arm, recover, and try to rebuild lives. Some languished as prisoners. The chapter of poetry contains many rhyming couplets typical of the era that nonetheless express real pathos, while the 1st Ohio Artillery's John Blanchard—seemingly influenced by Walt Whitman—contributed a sophisticated free verse entry entitled “Amputated” that deservedly would earn a place in any anthology of soldier writings. As a group they were proud of their service, worried about their rebuilt nation, and too often struggled with unhealed wounds, ineffective prosthesis, and an uncaring public.

The Left-Armed Corps is meticulously and thoroughly edited. Johnson knows her topic, having written a well-received previous work on contemporary images of Civil War bodies that included a chapter on the “Left-Armed Corps.” Each entry here includes a significant and well-researched biography of the veteran-author. Some have photographs. One useful appendix

provides for each entrant birth and death dates, residence, regiment, rank, period of service, place and date of wounding, date of amputation, and reference number to the original (and now digitized) entries. Another appendix lists the battles discussed by the authors; almost 20 percent lost their arms at Petersburg, Cold Harbor, or Gettysburg.

Johnson might have dug in a bit more when it came to the men's motivations for enlisting and fighting. While the contestants well may have enlisted and fought for cause and comrades just as the editor asserts, they also were wounded men who had given more than their share and now hoped to win much-needed cash from judges who also were known political ideologues. But Johnson is correct to stress that the soldiers were writing just after the war, not years later like so many of their former comrades. Indeed, these are some of the earliest public postwar writings of common soldiers about their war anywhere, predating the tidal wave of memoirs, regimental histories, and magazine articles that followed years later. *The Left-Armed Corps* may well be the coup de grace to Gerald Linderman's dated assertion of soldiers' post-war literary torpor. Overall, this is a solid addition to the literature of Civil War soldiers, an impressive example of historical editing and a worthy monument to soldiers who suffered for their country even long after they left the battlefield. *The Left-Armed Corps* should remind us as well that there are many 'wounded warriors' among us today, with their own stories to tell.

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