

Southern Cavalier, Steadfast Unionist: An Ohio Poet-General's Elegant Dispatches From The Field

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Review

SOUTHERN CAVALIER, STEADFAST UNIONIST **An Ohio poet-general's elegant dispatches from the field**

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Carter, Ruth C. *For Honor, Glory & Union: The Mexican and Civil War Letters of Brig. Gen. William Haines Lytle.* University Press of Kentucky, ISBN 813121086

In her well-documented introduction to wartime letters of William Haines Lytle (1826-1863), editor Ruth C. Carter characterizes Ohio's poet-general as the epitome of the Southern cavalier -- vain, romantic, schooled in the social graces yet also pro-slavery, politically active, and a Douglas Democrat. According to Carter, only Lytle's fervent nationalism prevented him from fighting for the Confederacy. Lytle's family roots were in the Blue Grass state, and several Kentucky cousins served in the Confederate Army. However, it is difficult to imagine this third generation Cincinnati lawyer-politician and major general in the Ohio militia as captivated by the Southern ethos as Carter would have readers believe.

No hint of disloyalty to the Union

Although the letters Lytle wrote from Bardstown, his ancestral home, reflect his continuing affection for friends and relations, as well as his desire for leniency toward the civilian population, they contain not the slightest hint of disloyalty toward the Union. Carter also sees Lytle as emotionally and psychologically adrift in the decade before the Civil War, a victim of inner turmoil resulting from his inability to meet his family's high expectations (either at the bar or in the political arena) and his two failed romances. He found relief in drink and poetic composition.

All but three of the 106 autographed letters published by Carter are in the collections of the Cincinnati Historical Society. Except for a few colorful descriptions of the Mexican landscape, churches, and people, the 15 letters Lytle

wrote home during the final months of the Mexican War are disappointing. He entered the War late, and his regiment, the 2nd Ohio Volunteers, served as part of the force of occupation for Mexico City and vicinity. Although he rose quickly from lieutenant to captain in Company L, he seems to have been bored.

The Mexican experience served Lytle well in the Civil War. He knew how to command and maintain the respect of rough recruits. Although his writing skills and powers of observation had not changed, there was more to report. Readers will enjoy Lytle's unrestrained and honest remarks on military and personal affairs. The advantages and disadvantages of rank, for example, are reflected in frequent references to the "Professor," John Wilson, a black servant. Also, Lytle was not ashamed to acknowledge the burden of responsibility he felt for the lives of his men. The war scenes that touched him deeply involved loyalists and secessionists alike. He found the citizens of Huntsville, Alabama, "a splendid people," but he also bemoaned the sufferings of unionists in eastern Tennessee.

An all-too-prevalent theme in Lytle's letters is the delay in his promotion to brigadier general. The source of the delay may have been Lytle's own physical condition. He received a severe leg wound in the Battle of Carnifex Ferry in 1861. The wound was slow to heal, and when the Army of Ohio took the field in 1862, Lytle was left behind to train new recruits. Later that year, from May to the end of August, he performed garrison duty at Huntsville, Alabama, protecting the Federal supply line.

During Bragg's invasion of Kentucky, Lytle got back into the fray at the head of the 17th Brigade, 3rd Division, Army of the Ohio, only to be wounded in the head and left for dead at the Battle of Perryville. His capture and parole further delayed his advance in rank. Subsequently exchanged, promoted (March 1863), and returned to duty, on September 20, 1863, he was again wounded, this time fatally.

John R. Sellers is historical specialist for the Civil War and Reconstruction periods in the Library of Congress manuscript division. His publications include Civil War Manuscripts: A Guide to Collections in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress and Maps and Charts of North America and the West Indies.