

### Tanglewood Tales: Berkshire County Supported Its Soldiers In Deed And Verse

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## Review

### TANGLEWOOD TALES

#### **Berkshire County supported its soldiers in deed and verse**

**Marshall, Jeffrey D.**

**Spring 2001**

**Murray, Stuart** *A Time of War: A Northern Chronicle of the Civil War*. Berkshire House Publishers, 2001-03-01. ISBN 1581570112

An ancient, gigantic elm tree, the pride of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, was felled in the town square in the summer of 1864 when the risk of falling limbs finally outweighed the protective esteem the citizens held for it. The elm's fate symbolized dramatic changes for the people of Berkshire County during the Civil War, as recounted by Stuart Murray in **A Time of War**.

Mostly rural Berkshire County produced one complete infantry regiment (the 49th Massachusetts Volunteers) and hundreds of soldiers who served in a dozen other state regiments. Some of the Bay State's great war heroes called Berkshire home, or had strong ties there, including Brigadier General William F. Bartlett of Pittsfield, and frequent visitors Robert G. Shaw of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. of the 20th Massachusetts. Murray follows these and several less notable characters (including two Berkshire emigrants who served as officers in the Confederate armies) throughout the war.

An equally important theme is the home front. Murray brings to life the pageantry and patriotism of small New England towns as they recruited and equipped local boys to save the Union. Here lived the aged author and philanthropist Catharine Maria Sedgwick, and Herman Melville, who wrote stirring verses on the triumphs and sufferings of Union soldiers as he sulked over the initial failure of *Moby Dick*. Murray lavishes his work with contemporary poetry, especially Melville's, to excellent effect. Berkshire County prospered during the war as manufacturers expanded to meet the demand for military materials. But there was a dark side, too, not limited to the grievous casualties Berkshire men suffered at Gettysburg and at the Wilderness. The gruesome

murder of a mother and her two children that shocked the county in 1862, and an epidemic of arson suggest deep social stresses, perhaps brought on or exacerbated by the war.

Murray does not examine these issues deeply, preferring the role of chronicler to that of analyst. His narratives of the battles and campaigns Berkshire soldiers participated in fit the purpose well, though some of his interpretations are suspect. In summarizing the battle of the Wilderness, for instance, he writes that "Lee had held his ground against Grant's frontal attacks" when, of course, it was Grant who more significantly held his ground against Lee's flank attacks. He also accepts uncritically the view of Reconstruction as a time "when much of the South was looted by unscrupulous 'carpetbaggers' from the North."

Despite these drawbacks, **A Time of War** is a thoroughly engaging book that sheds light on the changing conditions of life on the home front. Murray's work should interest not only the people of western Massachusetts, but all who are curious about the interactions between the northern home and battle fronts.

*Jeffrey D. Marshall is the archivist and curator of manuscripts at the University of Vermont Library, and editor of A War of the People: Vermont Civil War Letters (1999).*