

The Moving Appeal: Mr. McClanahan, Mrs. Dill, and the Civil War's Great Newspaper Run

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Review

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Ellis, B.G. *The Moving Appeal: Mr. McClanahan, Mrs. Dill, and the Civil War's Great Newspaper Run*. Mercer University Press, \$45.00 ISBN 865547645

Battlefield publisher:

The South's fair and balanced news

In the weeks before Memphis fell to Yankee troops, publisher John Reid McClanahan of the *Memphis Daily Appeal* finalized plans to disassemble his huge Hoe press and flee to safety in Mississippi rather than lose his newspaper to enemy forces. It would prove to be the first of several major moves that eventually earned the newspaper the cognomen of *The Moving Appeal* during the war years. McClanahan would transport his press, staff, and newspaper operations from Granada, Mississippi to Jackson, then to Atlanta, and finally to Montgomery, Alabama, to escape the advances of the Northern army and to remain one of the Confederacy's most trusted voices, especially on the Western front.

Painstakingly researched and impeccably documented, **The Moving Appeal** by B. G. Ellis chronicles the birth and development of the Memphis newspaper during the antebellum period, then tracks its movements throughout the South against the backdrop of Civil War. The book serves double duty as a biography of McClanahan and *Appeal* employees America Carolina Dill and Benjamin Franklin Dill. Ellis sets the record straight about the shady character of the Dills and also about the power and influence of the hard-drinking and hard-working McClanahan.

Ellis uses an abundance of primary sources, from dusty court documents that expose the Dills as professional thieves, to modern-day interviews with medical experts who provide interesting details about McClanahan's bout with syphilis in the weeks before his death. Based on new evidence and a fresh look at known facts, the author makes compelling arguments for several bold assertions, one of

them being that McClanahan's death was murder rather than an accident or suicide as previously believed.

Ellis is a skilled writer. Throughout the book, she selects day-to-day news from the pages of the *Appeal* and other newspapers to advance the story and set scenes with colorful and accurate descriptions. For example, Ellis introduced the city of Montgomery, Alabama, with the following from pages 321-322, all based on information found in the city's newspapers: The city's noise assaulted travelers and was an agony for those suffering from hangovers—like McClanahan and Harmon. If ears winced from the shrill whistles of trains or if feet tingled from vibrations of the horns of the steamers, the soul reeled from hacker bellowings about omnibuses and carriages, and the piercing yells of newsboys blocking traffic with their ink-wet wares. Montgomery's major racket came from downtown and seemingly straight from the battlefield: gunfire, screams, and shouts from stabbings, brawls and robberies, and impromptu serenades by the band of the 1st Arkansas regiment. Hand-to-hand skirmishes were common. One duel fought near the *Appeal*'s new quarters was between former law partners who took to pistol-whipping each other after they ran out of bullets. The sounds of justice came from outside the courthouse where officials applied the whip to black backs (fifty lashes for stealing a pocketbook). The sounds of survival came from the depositary offices in bellows or anguished cries by those exchanging old five-dollar notes for new ones at less value. The sounds of municipal penny-pinching came from the night-time moanings of those robbed or raped because of dimmed gas lights or from the day-time shrieks of pedestrians tripping over garbage or dead cattle or falling into mudholes.

The story of the *Appeal* as a Southern exile makes for great drama and interesting reading, but does not, as Ellis contends, raise the newspaper to the ranks of the *New York Herald* or the *New York Daily Tribune*. The circulation numbers simply were not there. Moreover, McClanahan and the Dills were colorful characters and produced an excellent product, but their achievements could not hold a tallow candle to the editorial influence of Horace Greeley or the news innovations of James Gordon Bennett.

The Moving Appeal does, however, make an enormous contribution to journalism history. It illuminates the content, practices, and movements of one of the most interesting Southern dailies of the nineteenth century. It uncovers the naked truth about dishonesty in the counting room and alcoholism in the editorial office — two vices by no means exclusive to the *Memphis Daily Appeal*, but

rarely recorded in detail by history.

Susan Thompson, an assistant professor in the mass communication department at the University of Montevallo, is co-author of Fundamentals of Media Effects and Introduction to Media Communication. The Penny Press, a book based on her award-winning dissertation, will be published by Vision Press in 2004.