

A Handful of Providence: The Civil War Letters of Lt. Richard Goldwaite, New York Volunteers, and Ellen Goldwaite

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Review

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Skipper, Marti, Editor and Taylor, Jane, Editor. *A Handful of Providence: The Civil War Letters of Lt. Richard Goldwaite, New York Volunteers, and Ellen Goldwaite.* McFarland & Company, \$49.95 ISBN 786418567

Separation anxiety

A universal story of love

Negative comments have been made in recent years about the quality of some published Civil War letters. Historian Russel H. Beatie related how he used to scorn the slim volumes of letters from insignificant men about insignificant events, until he came to realize that they all make invaluable, if not indispensable, contributions to the researcher-writer. But if all published letter collections have intrinsic value, surely they vary widely in usefulness to the researcher-historian. A Civil War letter collection gains worth if it represents in detail a previously unchronicled unit or theater of the war, if it offers commentary on noteworthy people or events, or if it delivers particularly vivid descriptions of soldier life. **A Handful of Providence** does none of these.

Countless letters written by Civil War soldiers have been preserved; comparatively few letters that were sent from home to the front survive. Many soldiers burned the accumulated letters of their loved ones on the eve of a march or when they became too bulky to carry. That **A Handful of Providence** includes the letters of both a soldier and his wife is the book's strongest attribute. Both writers were prolific. The book includes 132 letters that editor Marti Skipper found in a burlap bag among her late mother-in-law's effects.

Richard M. Goldwaite, age 35, married Ellen Hill, age 20, on January 29, 1861. Richard, a veteran of the Mexican War, a fireman, tobacconist, and storekeeper, enrolled three months later, on April 23, in the 3rd New York Volunteer Infantry and was commissioned a second lieutenant. The regiment was posted at Fort Monroe, Virginia, and took part in the engagement at Big

Bethel on June 10. In August, Richard was sent to Albany on recruiting duty; during his absence his regiment was ordered to Fort McHenry in Baltimore. On rejoining the regiment, Richard occasionally headed guard details aboard a steamship plying Chesapeake Bay, coming briefly under fire during one voyage. Richard resigned from the 3rd New York on February 24, 1862, and reenlisted on March 19 in the 99th New York Volunteer Infantry, the Union Coast Guard. The 99th was stationed at Fort Monroe and Norfolk during the Peninsula campaign. It continued to serve in the Norfolk area until the spring of 1863, when it took part in operations around Suffolk, participating in its most severe skirmish on May 1. By that time, Richard had become disillusioned with army life--and disgusted that emancipation had become a Union war aim--and he resigned for good and was discharged at Suffolk on June 5, 1863.

While Richard served in the war's backwaters, Ellie Goldwaite often chafed in her own backwater--her parents' farm in Rexford, Saratoga County, New York. She occasionally broke the monotony of country life with visits to Albany, where her family owned property. Leading largely mundane lives, Richard and Ellie frequently apologized to each other for the lack of news in their letters. Noting how poorly they had expressed their thoughts (too critically, for sure), they often requested that their missives be burned.

These two uneventful lives were not without drama, however. Both husband and wife liked to relate their dreams, Ellie in particular, and she seemed to regard them as omens. There is appeal in some of her surreal descriptions: I dreamed of being in a school house and that the school was full of honey bees and that I was throwing snow balls at the bees. A grave crisis erupted in the spring of 1862 when nine of Ellie's letters were misdirected, causing much anxiety to the couple, who suspected some unknown enemy was tampering with their mail. Ellie grew particularly frantic at this turn of events.

Their respective morale waxed and waned as the war dragged on. Ellie despaired for the Union cause after the failure of the Peninsula campaign. The support she had previously given Richard for his service collapsed. On the Fourth of July, 1862, she wrote, What is honor after anyone is dead or crippled for life? Dick, do come home. If there is anything that can make me feel proud, it would be to hear that you was coming home. Despite his relative lack of hardships, Richard declared, A soldier must have a heart like a stone to stand all that he is compelled to go through. Richard consistently maintained that he would survive his service and return to his wife unscathed. Ellie voiced some

uncertainties. In September 1862, she asked her husband to make sure his comrades would send his body home if he died. I have many friends among my Officers and men, Richard assured her in response, who will look out for me--and send me home.

Readers looking for accounts of great campaigns and battles or penetrating insights into soldier life or life on the home front will not find them in **A Handful of Providence**. What they will find (as the editors promise) is a universal story of love, hope, despair, separation, and the unknown that makes for often gripping reading.

Mark H. Dunkelman's latest book is Brothers One and All: Esprit de Corps in a Civil War Regiment (Louisiana State University Press, 2004).