

The Secret of War: A Dramatic History of Civil War Crime in Western North Carolina

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Review

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Garren, Terrell T. *The Secret of War: A Dramatic History of Civil War Crime in Western North Carolina.* The Reprint Company, \$25.00 ISBN 871525433

Secrets revealed

Local history recalled to life

Novels set during the American Civil War have always been popular with readers who like historical fiction. In the past few years especially, a large number of such books have appeared. Among them is the recent **The Secret of War: A Dramatic History of Civil War Crime in Western North Carolina** by Terrell T. Garren.

The author, a native western North Carolinian and a commercial writer for the past twenty years, has based his book on the Civil War experiences of his great-grandparents Joseph Youngblood and Delia Russell Youngblood of Henderson County. The two young mountain sweethearts profess their love on the eve of the Civil War and vow to marry at the conflict's end. As does the narrative of the major characters in the famous novel *Cold Mountain*, Garren's story moves back and forth between Joseph's war experiences and Delia's life on the home front.

At the outbreak of the war, Joseph Youngblood joins the 25th North Carolina Infantry and marches off to fight for the Confederacy. He endures the Battle of Malvern Hill, is captured at Antietam, and is imprisoned at Camp Morton in Indiana. He escapes from the Federal prison and makes his way south to Dalton, Georgia, where he is reunited with two of his brothers, J.N. and Hiram Youngblood, who are with the 60th North Carolina. After Hiram is executed for desertion, Joseph and J.N. desert the 60th Regiment and flee to Tennessee, where they surrender to Union troops and are sent to prison, again at Camp Morton. At the end of the war, the nearly dead Joseph is nursed back to health at a charity hospital in Indianapolis, although for a time his family and friends believe,

because of a case of mistaken identity, that he has died.

In the meantime, Delia Russell suffers many hardships as she waits for Joseph's safe return. Partially sustained by the devotion of her family's loyal slaves Zeke and Nanny Mills, she endures Federal raids, deprivation, despair, and abuse by a drunken and domineering father. She becomes the victim of a horrible crime committed by Federal troops under the command of the notorious and ruthless General Alvan C. Gillem. In a graphic scene of violence, Gillem's cavalymen--urged on by the lecherous local white trash Matthias Dees, who has joined the Union army--murder the slave Zeke and brutally beat and rape Delia. As a result of the rape, Delia becomes pregnant. Shortly after she gives birth, her drunken father murders the infant. On returning home, Joseph, J.N., and their Garren friends revenge Delia by killing Dees. Scarred by the war, Joseph and Delia nevertheless marry and begin a long life together.

The Secret of War's dust jacket, written by Dr. Newton Smith, associate professor of English at Western Carolina University, declares that unlike the distorted history of *Cold Mountain*, Garren's novel is history faithful to the facts. But as do most works of fiction that attempt to invent scenarios and words for real historical figures, **The Secret of War** contains a number of historical improbabilities and errors. On page 60, for example, Zebulon B. Vance, who became governor of North Carolina in September 1862, proclaims at the outbreak of the war: I own no slaves of my own. He also denies that slavery is related to secession. In reality, Vance owned several slaves and believed firmly in the institution of slavery. His ultimate commitment to secession and Confederate nationalism was based in large measure on his belief that only an independent Southern nation could guarantee the survival of slavery. Readers might also question Joseph Youngblood's observation on page 217 that the Confederate government had begun officially enlisting African Americans into white regiments as regular soldiers by April 1864. Civil War scholars could be surprised to learn on pages 233-234 that the reason President Lincoln left several states out of the Emancipation Proclamation was to appease the proslavery Gillem and his drinking companion Vice President [Andrew] Johnson. A number of small mistakes appear in the novel. On page 165, for instance, Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton is referred to as William Stanton. This reviewer also wonders if such terms as Krauts, chow line, Sarge, and AWOL were commonly used during the Civil War.

In **The Secret of War** most of the crime in Civil War western North Carolina is committed by Federal troops, particularly those of the infamous Gillem, whose men are mostly drunks or bounty hunters or worse. The author makes little reference to the atrocities inflicted by Confederate troops or western North Carolinians who remained loyal to the United States. The episodes of torture and murder at Shelton Laurel receive only a brief mention.

The novel includes an index and several interesting photographs of the principal persons featured in the book, as well as a Historical Perspective by the author that explains his research and praises the leadership and impeccable conduct of Union colonel (brevet general) William J. Palmer. The volume also contains a casualty list of members of the 25th Regiment in July 1862 and a list of deserters executed at Dalton, Georgia, in May 1864. The book will likely appeal mainly to Civil War and local history enthusiasts.

Joe A. Mobley is a former administrator and historian with the North Carolina Office of Archives and History. Currently he is a visiting lecturer at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. His book War Governor of the South: North Carolina's Zeb Vance in the Confederacy is scheduled for publication by the University Press of Florida in the summer 2005.