

Nature's Civil War: Common Soldiers and the Environment in 1862 Virginia

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Recommended Citation

Redd, Rea Andrew (2014) "Nature's Civil War: Common Soldiers and the Environment in 1862 Virginia," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.16.2.12

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol16/iss2/11>

Review

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Spring 2014

Meier, Kathryn Shively *Nature's Civil War: Common Soldiers and the Environment in 1862 Virginia*. University of North Carolina Press, \$39.95 ISBN 978-1-4696-1076-4

Medical Care at the Intersection Between Men and Their Environment

Stephen Berry's 2012 top ten list of "predictions for how broader professional trends will reshape Civil War historiography in the coming decades" offers #7: The Blue and Gray Will Go Green. Berry predicts that by 2022 ignoring the natural environment "within which human events unfold will be as ludicrous as conflating all history with the activities of a few white men." [1] In the same issue of the *Journal of the Civil War Era*, Lisa Brady states that environmental studies of the American Civil War has much more to offer than a catalog of the landscapes blighted by battles and cities crushed by armed conflicts. [2]

Kathryn Shively Meier's *Nature's Civil War: Common Soldiers and the Environment in 1862 Virginia* examines how troops on campaign challenged the marching, fighting and the natural environment when they sought to ruin the soldiers' health. Meier introduces her work with a discussion of public health issues as understood by both Confederate and Federal soldiers. Both "believed nature to be a significant and sometimes definitive force in shaping their physical and mental health". [3] Sleeping, marching and preparing food out of doors made each of the natural environments challenging. Furthermore, typhoid, malaria, diarrhea, dysentery, rheumatism, scurvy, sunstroke, and a variety of emotional depressions were not limited to a single natural environment.

Nature's Civil War is both a medical history and an environmental history of eight months of military campaigns in Virginia. It offers the common soldiers' perspectives on the environment and their feelings on how the natural environment is killing them. The Peninsula Campaign was fought in the midst of swamps and the Shenandoah Campaign was fought in what would appear to be a

healthier environment of clear streams and rivers. The Shenandoah River Valley's Eden is contrasted with the insalubrious swamps of The Peninsula. Readers may come to *Nature's Civil War* with the notion that obviously the Shenandoah Valley must have been a great deal healthier environment than the Peninsula's. The author finds that the 1862 Shenandoah Valley campaign that began in January with the Confederates marching to and encamping at Romney in the northern portion of the valley. The march was challenging to the Confederate troops' health. On picket duty, soldiers froze to death. Mountainous terrain, quickly changing temperatures and weather, constant marching, and the general failure of Confederate logistics created health hazards during a season when foraging was less possible and self-care networks were not yet likely to be in place.

Meier understands troops' seasoning process to be lengthy, constant and complex. The author states that the Army of the Potomac in 1862 was the second largest city in the Confederacy after New Orleans and that the Army of Northern Virginia was twice the size of Richmond. The initial stage occurs during the first large encampment during which measles, chicken and small pox, mumps, whooping cough, and diphtheria assault the recruits. Meier intuits that urban recruits may indeed have become less sick from diseases than did rural recruits. A second stage occurs during campaign marching and battle. A third stage occurs after combat when burials of the battlefield dead, emotional shocks and melancholy rained blows on the survivors' bodies and minds. Not in Meier's *Nature's Civil War* is a discussion of battlefield surgery; diseases not bullets were the primary cause of the 750,000+ deaths during the war. The book is social history; combat is not a topic reviewed here by the author. It is the time between the battles that is the focus of *Nature's Civil War*.

In the era before the war, the notion of heroic medicine was waning and homeopathic medicine was becoming licensed. During this era, medicine was performed by home members who followed popular and readily available guidebooks. The troops and doctors of the Civil War were products of Jacksonian America and they were often at odds regarding exactly what was good mental and physical health. Middle and upper class reformers in the U.S. Sanitary Commission challenged the U.S. Army's Medical Department. Meier understands that possibly most of the soldiers of 1862 in Virginia had begun the seasoning process or had nearly completed it. During this year, the author believes that the soldiers were developing two networks of health care: one consisted of the regular army's medical service and the other consisted of

self-care assisted by comrades-in-arms and others. Meier believes that it was midway through the seasoning process that soldiers began constructing their own network of self-care routines and friendships which included both comrades-in-arms and civilians. Civilians who were in and around the camps and in the path of a march became members in individual soldiers' self-care networks. Often women and African-Americans were a part of this network. The author concludes that "self-care often demonstrably improved physical health and morale." [4]

Meier describes self-care and how it was performed. It was very individualistic and was concerned with what may appear to today's readers as mundane activities. Soldiers sought to bath outdoors more frequently than ordered. Bad water was made drinkable by boiling it with coffee beans. Of course, the soldiers' self-care methods engendered disputes with regimental surgeons and other regimental officers. Unaccustomed to professional care, the soldiers of 1861 and 1862 were suspicious and critical of medical services that followed regulations and disliked surgeons who were wary of enlisted men and thought them to be likely shirkers. One method of self-care included straggling which at times became an exercise to obtain vegetables and fruits. Straggling also occurred when soldiers believed that they needed rest in order to recuperate from long marches performed in staggering heat or drenching rain.

Increased spiraling upward rates of sickness and poor morale frustrated commanders during the 1862 Shenandoah Valley and Peninsula campaigns. During these campaigns, officers as well as enlisted men developed personal health communities that included wives visiting camp and African American servants. Concerns relating to cooking out of doors, finding clean water, and protection from inclement weather were constant. Fevers, fleas, flies, and frostbite were just a few of the medical concerns which were addressed by self-care networks.

At the heart of Meier's book is a sample of soldier letters, diaries and memoirs from winter 1861-1862 through mid-August 1862 created by 205 individuals. The author reinforces this sample by consulting *The Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion*, *Outlines of the Chief Camp Diseases*, the regulations of the Confederate army, the papers of the U.S. Sanitary Commission and other documents. One of her several goals for *Nature's Civil War* is to serve as a reminder to military historians to "look beyond the battlefield to understand fluctuations in morale". [5] Though beyond the

mid-August 1862 limit of Meier's book, an historian who dwelt upon this issue is Joseph L. Harsh. His trilogy, *Confederate Tide Rising*, *Taken at the Flood* and *Sounding the Shallows* are studies of Robert E. Lee's strategy, tactics and his troops' deteriorating health during the 1862 Maryland Campaign.

In *The Life and Billy Yank* and *The Life of Johnny Reb*, Bell I. Wiley established a field of Civil War literature that places the voices of the soldier in the forefront. Throughout the Meier's *Nature's Civil War* the words of the soldiers are frequently offered and readers may be reminded of Wiley's legacy. The bibliographic resources of *Nature's Civil War: Common Soldiers and the Environment in 1862 Virginia* are numerous. Notable is the amount of archived collections of personal papers, newspapers, government documents, published medical sources and personal narratives, and secondary works including books, articles and chapters consulted by the author. Meier's work is well written and is accessible to the general reader. Certainly it contributes to emerging field of environmental studies of the American Civil War and is a fine example for others seeking to develop a thesis regarding Lisa Brady's request for environmental studies that do much more than "catalog the physical destruction caused by war and its related studies." [6]

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¹ <http://journalofthecivilwarera.com/forum-the-future-of-civil-war-era-studies/>

² <http://journalofthecivilwarera.com/forum-the-future-of-civil-war-era-studies/the-future-of-civil-war-era-studies-environmental-histories/>

³ *Nature's Civil War: Common Soldiers and the Environment in 1862 Virginia*, Kathryn Shively Meier, page 2.

⁴ *Nature's Civil War: Common Soldiers and the Environment in 1862 Virginia*, Kathryn Shively Meier, page 5

⁵ *Nature's Civil War: Common Soldiers and the Environment in 1862 Virginia*, Kathryn Shively Meier, page 3

⁶ <http://journalofthecivilwarera.com/forum-the-future-of-civil-war-era-studies/the-future-of-civil-war-era-studies-environmental-histories/>