

The Iron Brigade in Civil War and Memory: The Black Hats From Bull Run to Appomattox and Thereafter

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Review

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Herdegen, Lance *The Iron Brigade in Civil War and Memory: The Black Hats from Bull Run to Appomattox and Thereafter*. Savas Beatie, \$19.95 ISBN 978-1-61121-106-1

The Impact of the Black Hats on How We Remember

Few stand as qualified to write a comprehensive history of the Union Army's storied Iron Brigade as Lance Herdegen, the former director of the Institute for Civil War Studies at Carroll University. His latest work, *The Iron Brigade in Civil War and Memory: the Black Hats from Bull Run to Appomattox and Thereafter*, adds another title to his similarly focused works like *The Men Stood Like Iron: How the Iron Brigade Won Its Name* and *Those Damned Black Hats: The Iron Brigade in the Gettysburg Campaign*, winner of the Army Historical Foundation Distinguished Writing Award.

Herdegen's intimate familiarity with the topic and the archival sources pertaining to it are on full display in his current work. He keeps the "Black Hats" at center stage by paying close attention to the soldiers in the ranks, especially with regard to the descriptions of the families and hometowns from which they hailed. This provides a fascinating look into the culture and values of American society at the middle of the nineteenth century.

While sectional differences between the North and South surely caused havoc prior to the Civil War, the antebellum period also contained demographically diverse constituencies in the western states that were formed out of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. Coming from places as different and far-flung as "Ireland, Germany, England . . . New England, New York, or Pennsylvania – or even Virginia and North Carolina" the people who settled in the West formed their own unique culture. It was an environment in which people were "judged less by their family connection and money than for their skill with axe and plow" (72).

Herdegen's diligence in examining the interior lives of those who marched off to help subdue the southern rebellion occasionally focuses on minutia which, while somewhat interesting, slows the pace of the narrative. One such example is the description of the difficulties that arose between Lieutenant Hollon Richardson and Colonel William Robinson, both men of the 7th Wisconsin Regiment, subsequent to Richardson's secretly wedding Robinson's daughter, Leonora (104 – 105). This survey of romantic intrigue that evolved into a squabble of in-laws could just as well have served as an illuminating footnote in a category equally suited for items like the soldiers' "displeasure over the issue of linen leggings" (122).

Herdegen shines when describing the transformation "during the early summer of 1862" of the volunteers from farmers and backwoodsmen into soldiers who eventually came to comprise an effective fighting force. While officers associated with the regular Army had to overcome the deep distrust of subordinates who often preferred men of prominence from their own state or locale, progress was slowly made. The "Old Army professionalism" of Brigadier General John Gibbon blended with the "enthusiasm and desire of intelligent and willing young volunteers to become real soldiers" which resulted in greater unit cohesion, more proficiency in drill, and conditioning the independent-minded westerners to accept the "habit of obedience" (142).

Assisting Gibbon was Lieutenant Frank Haskell who was destined to become "one of the most famous of all Wisconsin soldiers" as a result of his rallying the "Union line" and helping to "turn back the last great Confederate charge on the third day at Gettysburg" (66). For Haskell, Gibbon became "a mentor as well as a friend" as Haskell gained a reputation as "a rather severe drillmaster" (143-144).

The process of transforming the Iron Brigade into a formidable fighting unit was not too dissimilar from that applied by General George B. McClellan when he assumed command of the beleaguered troops who had survived the July 21, 1861, disaster of first Bull Run. Like McClellan, the commanders of the Iron Brigade demanded that their troops master the finer points of drill, maintain sobriety and cleanliness in camp, and subdue their will to the chain of command. This testified to the astuteness of leaders who understood that the cultivation of order and efficiency in garrison was crucial to achieving eventual success on the battlefield.

Another challenge for the men of the Iron Brigade, and northerners in general, was how to deal with escaped slaves who entered Union lines. While the former bondsmen gifted Union commanders with a vast and willing supply of manpower, they also presented a political headache and socio-cultural predicament. Some Union Army commanders like Major General Benjamin Butler refused to return fugitive slaves "to their previous owners" and labeled them "contraband of war" (153). Not everyone wearing Union blue was as accommodating. For example, one soldier blamed blacks "for the fix the country found itself in," and an officer went so far as to complain that "more lives will be lost in the next big battle, more treasure expended than the necks of the whole Negro race are worth" (155). Herdegen's inclusion of such perspectives highlights the volatile complexities that so persistently traumatized the body politic during the turbulent years before and during the Civil War.

Herdegen's narration of the Iron Brigade's participation during the Gettysburg campaign further displays his skill and diligence in thoroughly recounting events. In numerous engagements leading up to that momentous battle, the men from the west were tried, tested, and steadily hardened by combat. By the end of the confrontation at Gettysburg they had proven themselves worthy of a "bright new flag" which "included the names of the five regiments and the battles in which the brigade" had been "engaged – Gainesville, Bull Run, Antietam, South Mountain, Fredericksburg and Gettysburg" (453). Those contests had occasioned some of the hardest fighting of the war, especially at Antietam and Gettysburg where, respectively, the Union Army had thwarted the bold ambitions of General Robert E. Lee during his first and second invasions of the North.

Along with earning their laurels, the warriors of the Iron Brigade also developed a sober appreciation for the loved ones they'd left behind. In the aftermath of Gettysburg, and as the 1863 holiday season approached, many soldiers exhibited a "homesickness" that "was especially sharp during the quiet times." Mail calls produced much excitement and "the gloom was deeper for those with no letters to read" (455).

The closing segment of Herdegen's masterful work, "Postscript: Thereafter and Evermore," goes beyond merely acknowledging the sacrificial service of Civil War veterans. The description of these soldiers' return to civilian life is accomplished in a manner that inspires without becoming maudlin. The hearty

Midwesterners of the Iron Brigade had survived the horrors of combat and coped with the privations of Army camp life to forge bonds that lasted well into their latter years. Some, though, struggled with “troubling memories of war, sacrifice, destruction, maimed comrades, and those who died too young” as they wondered if all the suffering had been in vain (609-610). More than a few were embittered about the amount of life that had been expended in a war that gradually expanded its objectives to include slavery’s annihilation. In the end, “many, but not all” of the veterans found a way to accept that they had “not only saved the Union, but that they had marched to history’s drum in the great moral crusade of their lifetimes” (612).

The vast array of periodicals, manuscript collections, sources from historical societies, government publications, and the hefty number of secondary sources utilized for this work attests to the depth and breadth of Herdegen’s research. Although the work is occasionally hampered by shifts of tense and passages filled with ponderous details of questionable value, it is nevertheless a valuable addition to Civil War scholarship and a fitting tribute to the soldiers of that era.

Fred Johnson is Associate Professor of History at Hope College in Holland, Michigan. He is currently working on two projects, one examining the Confederate government's war on United States Railroads during the Civil War, and, the other examining the history of U.S. foreign policy on the African continent since 1945.