

Harvard's Civil War: A History of the Twentieth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry

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Review

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Ivy League Regiment

The Twentieth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry

No Union regiment in the Civil War embodied the perception of an Eastern elite better than the Twentieth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. Its original officers were predominantly students and alumni of Harvard, or their social equals, the sons of Boston's first families—men who believed it was their inherent right and responsibility to lead, whether in business, society, or war. They made no secret of their social superiority, and tried (in vain) to restrict the regiment's officer corps—or at least its field and staff—to gentlemen. These were the bright lights of their generation, including such blue-bloods as Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., his close friend Penrose Hallowell, Francis Winthrop Palfrey, Casper Crowninshield, Henry Abbott, James Jackson Lowell, Charles E. Cabot, Henry Ropes, and William Francis Bartlett. The Twentieth Massachusetts won glory at a terrible price but lived up to the high expectations set for it, as Richard F. Miller demonstrates in his elegant and masterful regimental history, *Harvard's Civil War*.

If most of the officers were gentlemen, the nucleus of the regiment, Miller states, consisted of four very non-gentlemanly companies: two of first and second-generation German-Americans, one of Irish, and one of Boston street toughs. Another company featured a contingent of Nantucket men, many of them sailors. Factions based on class and ethnicity quickly developed, yet the abolition of slavery defined the dispute between factions most clearly. Many of the gentlemen officers strongly opposed abolition, while the Germans and other enlisted men favored it, along with a devoted faction of officers supported by Massachusetts governor John Andrew. The task of molding these men into a

cohesive fighting unit fell to its popular colonel, William Raymond Lee, an 1829 West Point graduate from one of the Boston area's first families, who was aligned with the abolitionists. Lee gained the respect of men and officers on both sides of the question, and forged a compact, as Miller styles it, to keep the peace among competing interests within the regiment. But circumstances interfered with the compact: Lee and most of the abolitionist officers were wounded, captured, or killed in the battle of Ball's Bluff in October, 1861. Lee's further absences and his eventual resignation late in 1862 kept the regiment in a state of continuing strife.

Internal strife had to be laid aside, for the most part, when the regiment marched into battle. From the disaster at Ball's Bluff to the final assault on Petersburg in April, 1865, the Twentieth fought in most of the major battles in the East. It quickly gained a reputation for its toughness and for individual acts of bravery. Miller skillfully describes the battles and campaigns in which the Twentieth played a part, illuminating with personal accounts the familiar story of the Army of the Potomac and the less familiar part played by the Twentieth. As with other regiments hardened by the first year of war, the Twentieth was often put in the vanguard of attack. It led the street-by-street fighting in Fredericksburg in December, 1862, under murderous fire, stood near the point of the furthest Confederate advance at Gettysburg on July 3, 1863, and seemed to be in the thick of every battle in Grant's Overland Campaign in the spring of 1864.

Harvard's Civil War is the second full-length history of the Twentieth; the first, George Anson Bruce's *The Twentieth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry*, was published in 1906. Miller has used sources unavailable to Bruce, and some—notably the accounts of enlisted men collected by historian John Codman Ropes (whose brother Henry was mortally wounded at Gettysburg in the service of the Twentieth)—that Bruce omitted. A bibliographic essay summarizes the most important primary sources the author consulted, but a complete bibliography would have been useful. Miller's thorough endnotes, occupying seventy pages, provide much useful information and expand on points made in the text. Names are well-represented in the index, but it falls short on subjects—there are no entries, for instance, for abolitionism, recruitment, and morale, though these subjects show up chronologically under Twentieth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry.

Miller warmed up to the task of a regimental history by co-authoring (with Robert F. Mooney) *The Civil War: the Nantucket Experience, Including the*

Memoirs of Josiah Fitch Murphey (1994). Many of the Nantucket soldiers served in George Macy's Company I of the Twentieth Massachusetts. *Harvard's Civil War* is undoubtedly better for Miller's earlier work on the Nantucketers, as the author brought to it a better understanding of the unit's enlisted men. Miller has also written on more recent military topics, including *A Carrier at War: On Board the USS Kitty Hawk in the Iraq War* (2005).

Modern regimental histories often suffer from the same lack of objectivity that characterizes those written in the decades after the war. The earlier histories were written to memorialize rather than analyze, and the large body of such works helped to form the mythology of the Civil War. Few military units truly deserve scholarly attention, though narrative histories can be instructive and entertaining. The Twentieth Massachusetts is a major exception; its social divisions, the trials of warfare and conscience so well documented by its members, and its importance as a symbol of the best of the Bay State make it worthy of special attention. Richard F. Miller has succeeded in writing a scholarly and entertaining account of one of the most fabled Union regiments in the Civil War.

Jeffrey D. Marshall is Director of Research Collections at the University of Vermont's Bailey/Howe Library. He edited A War of the People: Vermont Civil War Letters (1999), and has written several articles and a historical novel, The Inquest (2006).