

The Bravest of the Brave: The Correspondence of Stephen Dodson Ramseur

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Review

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Looking Through the Eyes of a Confederate General

Long before the correspondence of Stephen Dodson Ramseur captured George Kundahl's attention, they caught the eye of a young graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin. Gary W. Gallagher, who contributes a foreword to Kundahl's volume, believes Ramseur's correspondence is of value because he "fit perfectly into the culture of command" created by Robert E. Lee (xii). Both daring and strict, Ramseur exemplified the type of leader Lee preferred. Additionally, the letters reveal Ramseur's "personality, relationships with members of his family, and attitudes toward nonmilitary topics and issues" (xi). Gallagher argues Ramseur's correspondence sheds particular light on the development of Confederate nationalism. Ramseur's antebellum identity evolved into an unremitting devotion to southern independence that helps "explain why it took so long and so much blood and treasure for the United States to crush the southern rebellion" (xii). These letters inspired Gallagher's dissertation, a study which would later become *Stephen Dodson Ramseur: Lee's Gallant General* (1985).

In *The Bravest of the Brave: The Correspondence of Stephen Dodson Ramseur*, editor Kundahl has collected, organized, and published the letters Ramseur wrote between October 1853 and October 1864. Kundahl has taken these remarkable letters and set them off with an introduction, careful references, and occasional explanatory notes that bridge the gaps in the correspondence. Kundahl is also the author of *Confederate Engineer: Training & Campaigning of John Morris Wampler* (2000) and *Alexandria Goes to War: Beyond Robert E. Lee* (2004). Both a retired senior government executive and army major general, he now works as an independent scholar.

Ramseur, born in Lincolnton, North Carolina, was the second of nine children in a mercantile family, and came to maturity in the midst of swirling debates over slavery and secession. His letters, which begin in his college years at Davidson and West Point, are thoughtful and particularly frank on sectional issues. While at West Point, Ramseur believed that southern students were superior to northern students in almost every way. Southern students, he claimed, stirred up more trouble because "as free and independent as the Sons of the South ever will be, they cannot bear with patience and obey" as the northern students could (31). As 1860 approached, the discernable division between students intensified. Ramseur called for secession even before graduating from West Point on July 1, 1860.

Approximately a third of the letters in the volume are written to David Schenck, Ramseur's future brother-in-law, with whom he was particularly close. Indeed, these letters provide an unusually intimate look into homosocial love and the nature of male friendships in the nineteenth century. "Oh! Dave! I love you too much, for to be separated from you makes me often unhappy. Do not smile at this as a *girlish feeling*, or a namby pamby profession. Oh No! it is the true and genuine devotion of an exalted friendship" Ramseur wrote while away at school (41).

There is a strong religious strain running through the collection also. Ramseur's mother was a staunch Presbyterian and inspired what remained a steadfast faith throughout his life. He discussed religious concerns frequently, and often lamented his own sinning state. "Sometimes I am so oppressed with my sinfulness," he wrote typically, "that I can not be but sad" (12). In the war, few letters left Ramseur's hands without prayers and beliefs nestled within. He fully believed that God supported the Confederate cause, writing "Our God loves justice & mercy. He will avenge us. He will protect and deliver us" (155).

After withdrawing from his position as a U.S. Army artillery officer, Ramseur risked life and limb in numerous battles, including Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, and Spotsylvania. "A victory without dangers is too cheap to be glorious!" exclaimed Ramseur typically at the start of the war (78). The hardships of a long, cruel conflict slowly eroded his youthful enthusiasm. In 1863, he claimed "I will endeavor to perform my whole duty, fearlessly but *carefully* and *prudently*" (126). And by 1864, Ramseur's letters were filled with thoughts of home and sentences like "let us hope that Sweet Peace will very soon

succeed the terrible carnage of this cruel war" (265). Nonetheless, he remained confident in his cause and believed a Confederate victory to be the only permissible outcome for the war. He received four wounds throughout his service, his promotions halting only when a bullet pierced his lung at Cedar Creek on October 19, 1864. That day Ramseur "exposed himself to every shot cheering & encouraging" his troops from his typical "post of honor and of danger" (294). Here, a Yankee bullet finally found its mark and delivered the fatal wound. Captured by the enemy's cavalry, Ramseur lingered through the night and died the following morning.

Beyond the discussion of his military experiences, however, Ramseur's letters are most valuable for the glimpses they give us into both courtship and newlywed experiences in a war-torn South. In 1862, after becoming engaged with his first cousin Nellie, Ramseur's prose blossomed with declarations of love, hope and fidelity. When duty prevented him from arriving home in time for their intended wedding day, he wrote Nellie "my disappointment has almost unmanned me. But no, I will perform my duty here & there. I'll come & claim your love" (166). They married just over a month later, on October 28, 1863. While happy to be married, Ramseur felt "it is very hard to have a Honey Moon this suddenly and cruelly cut short" (181). In the difficulties of the coming months, Nellie provided Ramseur with the love and support he desperately craved, and she became the visceral "cause" that specified and sustained his war effort. "My Precious Darling Wife I love you more and more every day" Ramseur vowed, affirming that "all thro' these trials and hardships I have endured, your love has cheered me in the performance of all my duties" (179). "My Heart's Most Precious Darling! You are the light and delight of my life. I live for you. And Oh! your love makes life so delightful for me," he penned in a characteristically beautiful letter (250). And yet, Ramseur felt words were insufficient, for while he wished he "could give expression in this letter to the intensity, the deep devotion, of my love to you," Ramseur simply believed "Dearest little wife, this is impossible" (262).

In April 1864, Ramseur reflected happily on the time they spent together that winter, fondly remembering "every little incident, every precious association, every joyous emotion! Ah!" (205). One such happy incident of that winter had resulted in Nellie's pregnancy. Ramseur was ecstatic to hear the news but felt it was "the greatest trial of my life to be separated from you *now!* But these trials do us good, even as gold is refined by the fire" (287). October 16, 1864, Nellie gave birth to their first child, a healthy little girl. Ramseur claimed

the news "relieved me of the greatest anxiety of my life" and immediately wrote his wife to ask whether he had a son or a daughter (289). He signed the letter "with love inexpressible" (290). This would be the last letter he would ever send. On his deathbed, he still did not know whether he had a son or a daughter. Just four days after the news of his baby's birth, the new father died. He was 27 years old.

In his final chapter, Kundahl includes several of the condolence letters sent to Nellie upon Ramseur's death. One letter expressed a hope that "God love & bless you & bind up your broken, bleeding heart" while another included the bullet that killed her husband (299). When Ramseur died, Nellie was just eight days shy of celebrating her one year wedding anniversary. Major Robert R. Hutchinson, Ramseur's medical officer, informed Nellie that her husband "told me to tell you that he had a firm hope in Christ and trusted to meet you hereafter" (294). Nellie never remarried and wore black for thirty six years until she died.

Kundahl's book rescues Ramseur's letters and papers from scattered boxes across the South. While this collection will be particularly valuable for scholars, this book should not be limited to the dusty confines of university offices. As a tale of friendship and love, life and death, duty and manhood, Ramseur's story encompasses many of the enduring and universal experiences of human existence. With a single bullet, Nellie lost the man who proclaimed "my Sweetest Darling, My Heart's Queen, my Best beloved, My beautiful little wife, how earnestly, increasingly I long to be with you" (261). But in the Civil War, longing was not enough. Instead, Ramseur would be remembered as "the bravest of the brave," a man who rode directly "from early manhood to eternity" (297).

Angela Esco Elder is a history graduate student at the University of Georgia, completing a thesis on widowhood and grief in the Confederacy.