

The Boy Soldier: Edwin Jemison And The Story Behind The Most Remarkable Portrait Of The Civil War

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Review

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Filipowski, Alexandra and Harrington, Hugh T. *The Boy Soldier: Edwin Jemison and the Story Behind the Most Remarkable Portrait of the Civil War.* Westholme, \$26.00 ISBN 9781594162640

Edwin Francis Jemison – Civil War Everyman or Mona Lisa?

When you talk to many historians and history buffs of a certain age, many talk about being captivated by *The America Heritage Picture History of the Civil War* by Bruce Catton. Among the many affecting images offered was a portrait of a young soldier, misidentified as “Georgia private Edwin Jennison.” Close to sixty years later, Alexandra Filipowski and Hugh T. Harrington’s *The Boy Soldier: Edwin Jemison and the Story Behind the Most Remarkable Portrait of the Civil War* attempts to tell us the story of the boy in the portrait, Edwin Francis Jemison, Co I, 2nd Louisiana. Continuing the earlier work of teacher and researcher Jo-Ann Aiello, Filipowski and Harrington flesh out the life, service and death of Jemison. Through attention to the Jemison extended family, the environs of Edwin’s homes and school, we learn about him and his world as it turned to war.

As with the story of any individual soldier, the story of the regiment in which he serves offers a frame for understanding Pvt. Jemison’s short military career. Using his familial nickname, Eddie, throughout, the authors try to give us a closer personal connection to the 16-year-old boy who enlisted and the 17-year-old soldier who lost his life at Malvern Hill.

The history of the Pelican Grays- Company I - of the 2nd Louisiana Infantry is used to imagine the story of Eddie as a soldier. Held in reserve or keeping watch in fortifications, Eddie and the Pelican Grays served where and as needed. As is the case with many a Civil War regiment, the banality of daily discomfort, framed by the terror of infrequent interludes of active combat did not allow Eddie to become desensitized to the vicissitudes of war. When he and the rest of the 2nd Louisiana marched into battle at Malvern Hill, their previous experiences

may have done little to prepare them for what they would face.

The researching of Eddie's death at the Battle of Malvern Hill provides us with the most interesting chapters of the book. Using newspaper articles of the period, the story of Edwin's death and burial take shape. These newspaper articles bring into question a mixture of truths, false memories, and perhaps a charlatan's molding of stories not able to be corroborated when all parties involved are long dead, which mars the researcher's ability to make any definitive statements about these accounts. Other more personal familial accounts, however, give us the bare bones on which the careful researcher must stand. In research, dead ends can be as fascinating as they are frustrating.

While every storyteller may not feel it is necessary to delve deeply into the still raw and complicated questions around the enslavement of a race, the authors sidestep the acknowledgement of the work of the enslaved in the Jemison household. It is difficult to read the sentence, "Monroe's population in 1860 was only 364 people, not including the slave population" (p. 21) without discomfort. The use of the word "people" to describe only the white population of Monroe without reporting the almost equal population of enslaved people in Monroe, Georgia seems out of place in this book and perhaps could be rethought if there are future editions printed.

In the end, however, the book sheds light on the life of a soldier whose image many know and contemplate. Is the enigmatic look on his face prescience, in the moment captured by the photographer, revealing the solemnity and poignancy of the loss of a generation's future promise in the prosecution of a lost cause?

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