

Reflections Of A Civil War Medical Cadet, Burt Green Wilder

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Review

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Wilder, Burt Green and (ed.) Reid, Richard M. *Reflections of a Civil War Medical Cadet, Burt Green Wilder*. Kent State University Press, \$29.95 ISBN 9781606353288

“February 5 About one o’clock Dr. Marsh came to say that in ward 5 Dr. Hartsuff was to amputate the leg of a man who had be shot in the knee; the joint is shattered and discharges profusely.; he is so weak that he will die unless relieved of the drain. All the surgeons and cadets were present. For some reason it was decided to use the tourniquet and I was asked to control the femoral artery in the groin with my thumb. Fortunately my nerves were steady, for it—after the chief cut around the limb was made—my thumb had slipped or I had felt faint, the man might have died before the artery could be secured. All was over at 2[pm] and we went to the dead-house to examine the limb, which is to be shown at the Army Medical Society tonight. After dinner I went to see the patient; he feels much more comfortable; his mother has beencaring for him and wished the operation performed.” Wilder’s Experiences Provides a Major Contribution to Civil War Sources

This remarkable passage from *Reflections of a Civil War Medical Cadet*, page 73, is almost commonplace throughout the book. Richard M. Reid, author of *Practicing Medicine in a Black Regiment: The Civil War Diary of Burt G. Wilder, 55th Massachusetts*, continues to mine the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections of Cornell University Library for Civil War surgeon Burt Wilder’s never before published manuscripts. This fascinating volume cover’s Wilder’s early service as a medical cadet.

During July 1862, Wilder left Boston to join Dr. Francis Brown, a surgeon working at Judiciary Square Hospital, one of the initial pavilion-style hospitals in Washington, D.C. He had neared the end of a Harvard course of study in comparative anatomy and had offered to serve as a friend’s military substitute. Brown’s offer of hospital duty was quite appealing to Wilder.

He left Boston on July 15 and was soon serving as a medical cadet in training. Immersed by the wounded from the Peninsula Campaign, nearly overwhelmed by the wounded of Second Manassas, and inundated by another wave arrived from Sharpsburg, Maryland, Wilder rose above the tide of their agony. He managed this in part by studying nightly for the medical cadet exam offered on October 8, which he passed.

Congress created the medical cadet position during the summer of 1861 in response to the medical crisis created by the wounded of First Manassas. Medical cadets were to act as dressers in hospitals and ambulance attendants when on campaigns. They would have the same rank and pay as the military cadets at West Point. Qualifications were males between the ages of 18 and 23 who had a liberal education as students of medicine, or who had been reading medicine for two years or had attended at least one course of lectures at a medical college. By November 1861 it became apparent that they were of great service in the fields and hospitals, quickly becoming efficient under surgeons who proctored them. Fifty more cadet positions were added to the Medical Service. Though Wilder did not have the specified requirements, he did have the appropriate recommendations from several practicing surgeons.

Soon after his arrival at the Judiciary Square Hospital, Wilder's talents caught the eye of Dr. John Brinton, a senior officer in the Medical Department. He had arrived for service just as the Medical Department began to consider the production and dissemination of medical knowledge such as writing case histories, debating unfamiliar wounds and illnesses, and providing encourage to those surgeons who wished to write and publish their observations and conclusions. The Washington, D.C. meetings of the Army Medical Society, initially open to only army surgeons and senior medical officers, began to welcome interested cadets who showed medical and surgical competencies.

When Richard M. Reid examined Wilder's nearly completed manuscript, he found that Wilder had drafted his recollections by drawing heavily upon his wartime letters to Sarah C. Nichols, whom he later married. Also, he turned to his friend and medical cadet James Adams' personal diary; they had entered military cadet service at the same time. Wilder also examined private and public records, from both of military and hospital archives or collections. He accessed the Judiciary Square Hospital ward books located in the Army Medical Museum and interviewed fellow doctors and former patients whom he located through the Pension Bureau. Furthermore, Wilder found published and private accounts of

patients who passed through the Judiciary Square Hospital and doctors who practiced military medicine during the war.

Working as an historian works, Wilder researched until he could explain conflicting eyewitness testimony. There were both favorable and unfavorable recollections of the work done at the hospital. To his manuscript Wilder added 16 appendices which contained brief biographic sketches of those mentioned in the text and also explained tasks performed by surgical dressers, acting medical cadets, and the medical officer of the day. Wilder diagrammed the wards, showing the positions of the bed, stoves, nurse's room, scullery, latrines, bath rooms and water closets of the wards.

Also in the appendices, Wilder remarks on the dimensions of the hospitals, the appearance of the medical cadet shoulder strap, the creation of the war books, the cadets' struggles with medical Latin, and even his decision to obtain the brain of Daniel Webster, a Federal soldier, before Webster's father arrived and claimed his son's body. Wilder also, in an appendix, offers a rebuke to nurse and poet, Walt Whitman.

Richard M. Reid's introduction to Wilder's manuscript is exceedingly helpful. He offers insights to Wilder's research techniques and writing style, assessing the importance of Wilder's Recollections as historical source material. Reid places antebellum medical education and surgical care into an American Civil War context and offers a brief history of the army medical department and its newly created hospitals and medical staffs. He summarizes how life in the Judiciary Square Hospital reflected the medical reforms created during the war. Additionally he describes the recent scholarship found in Shauna Devine's *Learning from the Wounded*, Margaret Humphrey's *Marrow of Tragedy* and Susan-Mary Grant's essay "Mortal in This Season."

Overall, Reid's Reflections of a Civil War Medical Cadet, Burt Green Wilder is a superb work of editing and elucidation. It should be essential reading for anyone interested in Civil War Medicine.

Rea Andrew Redd, is director of the Eberly Library at Waynesburg University and is an adjunct instructor of American History there. He has authored The Gettysburg Campaign Study Guide, Volume One,[2012] and Volume Two [2014]. His recent effort, From Altars to Amputations: Gettysburg's Churches Become Battlefield Hospitals, Historical Tour and Brief

History, will be published during 2018. His essay, “*The Point of No Return: Turning Points within the 1864 Presidential Election and the Doom of the Confederacy*” appears in *Turning Points of the American Civil War, 2018*, from the Southern Illinois University Press.

During 2017, he guided the acquisition and installation of a Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission marker in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania which is the birthplace of Major Jonathan Letterman, director of the Army of the Potomac’s medical service during 1862-1864.