

Dear Delia: The Civil War Letters of Captain Henry F. Young, Seventh Wisconsin Infantry

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Review

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Young, Henry F. *Dear Delia: The Civil War Letters of Captain Henry F. Young, Seventh Wisconsin Infantry.* Edited by Michael J. Larson and John David Smith. University of Wisconsin Press, \$29.95 ISBN 9780299323608

Collections of letters written by company- grade officers often prove more interesting than those from enlisted men or higher-ranking officers. *Dear Delia: The Civil War Letters of Captain Henry F. Young, Seventh Wisconsin Infantry* certainly confirms that generalization and more. It is one of the best collections of Civil War soldier letters that has been published during the past decade. Henry F. Young was a mill owner who enlisted in the 7th Wisconsin Infantry and rose to the rank of captain. He was a conscientious volunteer who nevertheless revealed to both his wife Delia and his father the gritty realities of soldier life.

From his enlistment in the summer of 1861 until the end of 1864 when he returned home after his young daughter's death, Henry Young served with his regiment continuously. His letters offer revealing descriptions of camp life including problems with fellow officers but are also good on military operations more generally. As a company officer he paid close attention to casualties and often commented on the dead and wounded in writing home about the various campaigns. His letters are replete with details about picket duty, troop reviews, bridge building, accidental deaths, and winter quarters. For historians studying environmental factors, there is plenty of information on weather, mud, and dust.

Young's opinions on a number of questions evolved during the course of his service. Like many new recruits, he assumed that the army would advance at any time and expected a short war. He soon learned that pay could be irregular, and that subject receives frequent comments in the letters as does his concerns about family finances. Early on, he claimed that certain politicians would like the war to continue and he occasionally railed against corruption. Young's views were generally conservative, but from the outset he complained about soldiers guarding rebel property. He expressed high hopes for George B. McClellan but also decided that

the Army of the Potomac was often “outgeneraled.” Most of all, Young remained loyal to the Union cause and to his own sense of duty. As he wrote to his father shortly before the Battle of Fredericksburg: “I am not A McClellan man, A Burnside man, A Hooker man. I am for the man that leads us to fight the Rebs on any terms he can get.” (p. 119). He generally supported emancipation but expressed initial doubts about the ability of African Americans to serve as soldiers. He worried about divisions in the North, the rise of the Copperheads, and the influence of ambitious politicians such as New Yorker Horatio Seymour. He became a strategically patient soldier, denying that Meade could have caught Robert E. Lee’s army after the Battle of Gettysburg and expressing steady confidence in the generalship of Ulysses S. Grant. He firmly believed that the reelection of Lincoln would mark the final, decisive blow against the Confederacy.

Michael J. Larson and John David Smith have done a first-rate editing job with these letters. A substantial introduction presents valuable background information on the Youngs, offers important context for the letters, and helpfully summarizes Henry Young’s military service. Extensive and well-researched annotations appear at the end of each letter, and these help the reader understand the unfolding military and political story. And unlike many such edited volumes, this one has a good subject index. Students of the Civil War are much indebted to Larson and Smith for bringing this fine set of letters into a handsomely printed volume.

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