

A South Carolina Upcountry Saga: The Civil War Letters of Barham Bobo Foster and His Family, 1860-1863

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Recommended Citation

Helsley, Alexia J. (2019) "A South Carolina Upcountry Saga: The Civil War Letters of Barham Bobo Foster and His Family, 1860-1863," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 21 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.21.2.23

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol21/iss2/23>

Review

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Spring 2019

Kennedy, A. Gibert, ed. *A South Carolina Upcountry Saga: The Civil War Letters of Barham Bobo Foster and His Family, 1860-1863*. University of South Carolina Press, \$49.99 ISBN 9781611179248

A South Carolina Upcountry Saga is a compilation of letters between members of the Foster family during the dramatic early years of the Civil War. The editor, a descendant of Barham Bobo Foster painstakingly located and transcribed the family letters. The letters begin with a terse note from B. B. Foster to a son, dated 20 December 1860, announcing “that South Carolina is out of the Union without a dissenting voice (p. 11) and end in 1863 except for a much later 1894 letter from Eunice Foster Kennedy to her father, B. B. Foster (p.328 ff).

The dates 1860 – 1863 reflect the family’s intimate involvement with the Confederacy and the deaths of their two sons: Lewis Perrin Foster and James Anthony Foster who both died in battle in 1862. James Anthony Foster died on 13 September and his older brother Lewis Perrin Foster on 13 December. While many of the letters are domestic in nature, of particular interest for historians are the battlefield correspondence and the descriptions of the daily challenges of army life. For example, L. P. Foster on 30 May 1862 writes his sister with news of two Confederate victories, the daily skirmishes outside of Richmond and difficulties with acquiring underwear and uniforms. Other letters recount battlefield casualties, health concerns, weather and to paraphrase a Civil War standard, “thoughts of home and God.” (“Just Before the Battle, Mother.”) Interspersed with the letters are helpful notes that provide context about events and individuals described in the letters. Among the more poignant letters is one dated 27 October 1862 from L. P. Foster to B. B. Foster describing the death and burial of his brother Toney (J. A. Foster) and a brief note dated 19 December 1862 of B. B. Foster’s daughter Eunice to her sister Sallie reporting the death of “our only Brother” [Lewis Perrin Foster]. In the brief note, Eunice also wrote: “Poor Mother, this last blow is too much for her, and Father almost sinks under it.

We know none of the particulars-we only know that both are now in heaven. I would that I were there....I feel like shrieking now.” (p. 312)

The volume is illustrated and has several maps of key Civil War engagements. In addition, the compiler has included a family genealogy, a list of the letters except those held by the University South Carolina Library (a calendar of all the letters would be helpful), and a useful introduction. In addition, Kennedy concludes with an overview of the latter life of B. B. Foster and his descendants.

Kennedy, a retired engineer, decades ago began the quest that led to this publication. According to the preface, in 1989 he acquired the “pockets” of his great-great-grandfather B. B. Foster. Those pockets contained seventy-five Civil War letters, the nucleus that became this compilation.

The book has a substantial bibliography, but does not include several standard sources, such the 1850 and 1860 population, agriculture, and slave schedules, and the *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*. In addition, the citations for the two archival sources used at the South Carolina Department of Archives and History [South Carolina Archives] are incomplete. The items cited are from the Compiled Service Records of Confederate Soldiers who Served in Organizations from the State of South Carolina (National Archives, M267).

Nevertheless, in transcribing and publishing the letters, Kennedy seized a rare opportunity to step inside the lives of past ancestors, walk in their shoes and learn about their lives. In so doing, he provides a window for historians and others to gain new insights into one of America’s darkest hours.

Alexia Jones Helsley currently serves as Senior Instructor of History and University Archivist at the University of South Carolina Aiken. Prior to joining the faculty of USCA, Helsley was archivist for many years with the South Carolina Department of Archives and History. A prolific writer, Helsley’s latest publications include The Lost History of Aiken County (The History Press, 2019); an essay “A Girl, A Boy and A Train” in Our Prince of Scribes: Writers Remember Pat Conroy (University of Georgia Press, 2018), and a requested chapter, “ ‘Better Babies:’ Dr. Daniel Lesesne Smith, His Baby Hospitals, and the Southern Pediatric Institute,” in Recovering the Piedmont Past, Volume 2: Bridging the Centuries in the South Carolina Upcountry, 1877-1941 (University of South Carolina Press, 2019).