

Untouched by the Conflict: The Civil War Letters of John Singleton Ashenfelter

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Review

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Ashenfelter, Singleton. *Untouched by the Conflict: The Civil War Letters of John Singleton Ashenfelter*. Edited by Jonathan W. White and Daniel Glenn. Kent State University Press, 2019. \$29.95 ISBN 9781606353837

“Civil War” in the title of this book might appear to be a crude marketing ploy because very few of the letters—written by Singleton Ashenfelter to his closest friend Samuel Pennypacker—even mention the war in passing. Instead the collection drives home the essential but often forgotten truth that ordinary life goes on even during a great national crisis. In this regard, I once heard historian Philip Paludan remark in a lecture that you could not hold supper just because there was a war on.

That reminder partly explains significance of this fascinating group of letters, but there are two other important features. Higher education struggled along through the war, and there are all too few sources that shed light on student life in the period. Secondly, Singleton Ashenfelter wrote unusually candid and interesting letters. Readers may not much care for him, and the editors rightly describe Ashenfelter as “arrogant, erudite, witty, impulsive, ambitious, self-interested, introspective, and deeply intellectual” (p. 13). Anyone who has ever taught college students will recognize Ashenfelter as a prototypical young man of great natural talent who wastes a good deal of that talent. In fact, he is rather proud of being a slacker and toward the end of his college career describes himself more as a “good fellow” than a “good student” (p. 115). One of his professors chastises him for a “carelessness” and “indifference” that had a deleterious influence on his classmates.

Yet on his own terms, Ashenfelter probably acquired a good education at Dickinson College. He hated reading textbooks and attending class but read all the time—just not the works that were assigned. Active in the Young Men’s Literary Union, he reveled in the Dickinson College Library and claimed to have read some 10,000 pages during his sophomore

year alone. So just when readers tire of Ashenfelter's sophomoric humor and mindless pranks, they run across his extensive comments on literature. At one point he even decided that Victor Hugo was a better novelist than Charles Dickens; so too he loved poetry and had more than a passing interest in science and logic. The editors include the college's classical curriculum in an appendix, and one wonders if Ashenfelter may have gotten more out of his studies than he admits in the bantering letters to his friend.

The editors point out that notions of manhood permeate the correspondence. In his halting progress toward maturity, Ashenfelter both ridicules and resists the efforts of the faculty and especially the college president, Herman Johnson, to act *in loco parentis*. There are drunken scuffles at literary society meetings, and Ashenfelter confesses to strong impulses to drink, impulses not always resisted. He expresses a budding interest in women, and the editors help sort out the details of his romantic life. In the end, the letters focus relentlessly on Ashenfelter himself. Claiming to hold principles in "utter contempt," he declares that "whatever contributes to my pleasure is right" (p. 100). In another letter he confesses to a remarkable degree of self-centeredness: "My standard of right lies wholly solely & entirely within myself" (p. 54). He shows no reluctance "in revealing even my most private thoughts" to Pennypacker and appears unembarrassed by his most candid admissions.

Ashenfelter rejected prevailing religious views. Doubting that the Bible was inspired or that Jesus was the son of God, he deemed Christianity "unnatural" (p. 34). Often sounding like a deist, he was equivocal about the prospects of an afterlife. Believing that geology had disproven the Genesis creation stories, he speculated that in the future a superior set of beliefs would supplant Christianity, a religion that he described as being "conceived in selfishness & supported by fear" (p. 56). Wondering why a benevolent God would permit human beings to behave so foolishly, he almost considered himself an atheist and as "intolerant as a puritan" (p. 78) toward religious orthodoxy.

Ashenfelter joined the militia during the Gettysburg emergency, but his service was like his comments on the war: very brief. He claimed to prefer Henry Clay to Charles Sumner, he detested the Copperheads, but his political opinions are difficult to pin down. He mentioned Grant's stalled offensive in the Overland Campaign but mainly to inquire about his friend's view of the situation. He philosophically denounced universal suffrage as "rule by the ignorant" (p.

101) but had nothing to say about slavery and race. It is equally remarkable that there are no references to war-related discussions with his classmates.

The very helpful introduction to the letters by Jonathan W. White and Daniel Glenn is well researched and nicely lays out the major themes found in the correspondence. Appendices deal with the cost of attending Dickinson and the history of the college during the Civil War. Also included is Ashenfelter's 1864 speech opposing capital punishment. The volume is well edited with a very good index. Despite the paucity of material directly relating to the Civil War, the letters provide useful information on a variety of topics and make for good reading as well.

George C. Rable, University of Alabama, Emeritus is currently working on a study of the relationship between George McClellan, Abraham Lincoln, and the Army of the Potomac and a project indexing published primary sources dealing with the Civil War:

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