Silent Cavalry: How Union Soldiers from Alabama Helped Sherman Burn Atlanta and Then Got Written Out of History

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Recommended Citation
DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.26.2.06
Available at: https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol26/iss2/5
Review
Spring 2024

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Before the Civil War’s first shots were fired, the New York Times recognized the predicament southern unionists faced. “Unionism with them amounts to something, because it costs something,” opined the paper in March 1861, “they are compelled to breast the swelling popular current of their own States. They run the risk of political ruin by defending the Union against the attacks of its enemies at home. They are charged with Abolitionism and are compelled to run the gauntlet of political persecution.” In *Silent Cavalry: How Union Soldiers from Alabama Helped Sherman Burn Atlanta and Then Got Written Out of History*, Howell Raines seeks to publicize the story of loyal Alabamians who fought for the Union. The First Alabama Cavalry is little known, he argues, due to early twentieth century collusion between unreconstructed Alabama officials and an influential cabal of Lost Cause scholars trained by William Dunning at Columbia University.

Howell Raines is a Pulitzer Prize-winning writer and former executive editor of *The New York Times* born and educated in Birmingham, Alabama. He began his journalism career as a reporter for the *Birmingham Post-Herald* and his professional posts included service as a White House correspondent and as bureau chief in Atlanta, Washington, and London. Already an established author, his previous four books include *Whiskey Man*, *The One That Got Away*, *Fly Fishing Through the Midlife Crisis*, and *My Soul Is Rested*. Raines’s Alabama roots and far-flung assignments permit him to write from the perspective of both a native son and an expatriate whose
lifetime interactions with Alabama’s leading political and academic figures allows for penetrating insights into the state’s insular mentality and ingrained distaste for outside criticism.

*Silent Cavalry*’s narrative writing mixes history with personal experiences and is stylistically reminiscent of Carl Carmer’s *Stars Fell on Alabama*. Divided into four parts and thirty-nine chapters, the book is part memoir, part history, part cultural analysis, and part scholarly detective story. Filled with over sixty years of the author’s encounters with influential people and historic vignettes, the book evokes a Faulknerian sense of how intra-familial relationships among Alabama’s ruling elite enabled them to alter history. Raines’s journalistic background makes the book an interesting read and he includes a helpful front-end ‘cast of characters’ register, but jumping back and forth in time and location while weaving together disparate threads may challenge some readers not already familiar with many of the addressed topics or individuals.

The book’s introduction lays out Raines’s central thesis that “history is not what happened. It is what gets written down in an imperfect, often underhanded process dominated by self-interested political, economic and cultural authorities.” (xx) Beginning late in the nineteenth century and extending into the Trump era, Raines commendably injects contemporary Lost Cause historiography into the narrative to explain how those who lost the Civil War were later able to rewrite its history and embed their preferred version in the nation’s collective memory. *Silent Cavalry* readers looking for a detailed study of the First Alabama’s military exploits will be disappointed as the topic is a stalking horse for the author’s larger argument that powerful forces in Alabama maliciously and intentionally sought to conceal the existence of anti-secessionist white southerners and to “disappear the First Alabama from the historical record.” (xx)

As Alabama was among the first to create a state archive, it makes for an interesting case study about the control of historical records, especially as it was turned over to politically
connected dilettantes like Marie Bankhead Owen. It was her pro-Confederate prejudices that for decades skewed the institution’s acquisition policies and prevented historians from accessing records that may have challenged her desired narrative. However, Raines’s contention that Alabama’s Lost Cause adherents sought to absolve their ancestors of any wrongdoing and suppressed inconvenient facts related to southern unionism is not new. Lost Cause studies, such as David W. Blight’s *Race and Reunion*, have been dismantling those falsehoods for some time, but Raines correctly notes that such revisionism remains a relatively new endeavor when compared to more than a century of neo-Confederate confabulation and distortion of the historical record.

Although Civil War Union Armies fielded some 258 cavalry regiments and 170 unattached mounted companies, Raines argues that the First Alabama “ought to be famous.” His rhetorical claim that the First Alabama Cavalry was “the point of the spear” Sherman drove through the heart of the Confederacy is a not borne out by the regiment’s middling wartime service record. Sherman selected the First Alabama as his personal escort during the March to the Sea for symbolic and practical reasons as its size and combat effectiveness was degraded due to death, desertion, and inability to secure sufficient replacement recruits. Raines particularly singles out writer Shelby Foote for allegedly concealing knowledge of the regiment’s existence from documentary film makers, thereby denying the unit its deserved recognition and “last chance for fame” (420) when Ken Burns’ highly successful production *The Civil War* reintroduced fresh generations of Americans to the conflict and raised Foote’s literary notoriety to new heights.

*Silent Cavalry* does not fit the mold of academic history as its personal narrative, conspiratorial assumptions, and broad judgments surpass what historians can do without direct evidence. For example, Raines argues that memories of northern Alabama’s unionist apostasy so rankled pro-Confederate parts of the state that the postwar legislature continually punished the
region through lack of funding for a century. Such a conclusion might appear tenable--and may even be true--but firm evidence is needed and no investigation is made to see if other rebel states with loyalist populations engaged in similar punitive measures. Raines is also often at odds with himself, claiming on one hand that mining government archives and military records is “the only sure way to overcome partisan slant in the written accounts,” (xx) yet repeatedly stating that he was not an original researcher” (122) and that his story of the First Alabama was not exhumed from official archives but “is a reporter’s book, not a scholarly work of original research.” (477)

Stationed in Washington for part of his long journalism career, Raines unfortunately missed pursuing a modicum of original research that might have fundamentally aided his quest to learn more about the First Alabama, and perhaps even his own family. The National Archives holds the regiment’s official Orders and Letters books as well as each company’s descriptive registers which provides personal information on each trooper that served in the unit. These vital administrative records reveal that the First Alabama was an amalgamation, not entirely made up of Alabamians, but of unionists from Tennessee, Georgia, Mississippi, and other southern states. Another invaluable NARA resource are the postwar pension applications which contain testimony about the hardships and suffering Alabama unionists endured at the hands of their neighbors and even family members. Southern pension claims can be particularly illuminating and in-depth as the U.S. Congress was loath to grant payment to anyone who had dubious or shifting wartime loyalties.

Silent Cavalry will interest general audiences as creative non-fiction, but Civil War or Lost Cause Memory scholars will not find any new arguments or sources. Readers seeking a regimental history may find the title a bit misleading, yet some of Raines’s questions merit investigation. Do his claims that Alabama political and academic authorities blatantly conspired to erase unionists from their state’s memory hold-up elsewhere? The book also has value for pointing out how
control of historical records can warp the narrative that historians are able to tell and for stressing the importance of archival institutions being led by professionals. Raines reminds us that those who control the story of the past control the present, and in turn, the future. It is a caveat applicable today when books are being pulled from library shelves because vocal minorities do not like the content suggesting that the warping of public knowledge now may be a spreading national problem.

David J. Gerleman is a Civil War historian, George Mason University lecturer, and emeritus assistant editor of the Papers of Abraham Lincoln. His paper ‘These Loyal Alabamians’: A Portrait of the First Alabama Union Cavalry from the Records of the National Archives received the David Warren Bowman Award from the Alabama Association of Historians.