

I Hope To Do My Country Service: The Civil War Letters of John Bennitt, MD, Surgeon, 19th Michigan Infantry.

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"I Hope To Do My Country Service": The Civil War Letters of John Bennitt, M.D., Surgeon, 19th Michigan Infantry (review)

James McCaffrey

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

James McCaffrey

"I Hope To Do My Country Service": The Civil War Letters of John Bennitt, M.D., Surgeon, 19th Michigan Infantry. Edited by Robert Beasecker. Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 2005. ISBN 0-8143-3170-X. Maps. Appendixes. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xxxv, 409. \$54.95.

In 1992, the Civil War-era letters of Dr. John Bennitt were donated to the library of Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Michigan. Senior Librarian Robert Beasecker has now edited them and had them published. There are over two hundred letters in the collection, including more than a score that were written before Bennitt joined the army.

[End Page 240]

The picture of Bennitt that emerges from his letters is that of a man who desperately misses his wife and daughters, a man for whom religion is of great importance and who sees slavery as a scourge on America, and a man who seems unable to decide what to do when the war is over.

Such collections of letters often contain interesting vignettes of battles or camp life, but these letters are barren of that. Dr. Bennitt spent most of his army time away from his regiment in brigade or division hospitals and was seldom even within hearing distance of the fighting. He and most of his regiment were captured in Tennessee on 25 March 1863, and, according to Beasecker, Dr. Bennitt was sent to Libby Prison in Richmond, from which he was exchanged at the end of May. Bennitt barely mentions this. Furthermore, his letters indicate that although he was not exchanged until the end of May, he was paroled and on his way north fully six weeks before that.

The editor has done an able job in chronicling Bennitt's life both before and after the war, but the letters themselves do not contain much of real interest.

*James McCaffrey
Houston, Texas*



Book Reviews

Williams places renewed emphasis on Lee's political skills in an illuminating treatment of his relationship with Governor Zebulon B. Vance of North Carolina. Finally, Mark L. Bradley demonstrates Lee's under-rated abilities as Confederate general-in-chief in motivating "Johnston to fight" (p. 166) before Bentonville, helping him to overcome his pathological suspicion of his superiors.

The only disappointing feature of this book is the framework that the editor erects. His historiographical observations are frequently shrewd, and he notes the penchant of historians to parade "scholarly assumptions" that "sometimes masquerade as standard 'truths' in need of scrutiny" (p. xxi). A pinch more of the audacity shown by his subject might have prompted Carmichael to move the subject on, but his contribution on "Lee's Search for the Battle of Annihilation" falls back too readily on "revisionist" assumptions that are badly in need of further scrutiny. He has been too scrupulous in attempting to employ aspects of the views of Thomas L. Connelly and others, instead of concentrating on developing new perspectives. I share Miller's view that Lee participated in no such "search," but rather exploited the opportunities offered to him by the errors of his opponents. Carmichael relies on two key assumptions that underpinned the writings of "revisionists," namely, that a truly shattering offensive victory was "an impossible goal" and that Civil War armies were "virtually indestructible" (p. 1). He counsels a "holding operation" and the avoidance of offensive activity. Carmichael's most challenging assertion is that by 1864 Southern opinion preferred defensive measures. Lee no longer remained "perfectly in tune with his constituency" (p. 25). I am not convinced, otherwise the clamour before Atlanta in that June and July would have supported Joseph E. Johnston rather than called for his dismissal. Perhaps the main task that lies before Civil War historians is to shake off the vestiges of the Victorian Syndrome and its simplistic faith in the defensive as a cure-all.

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