
In The Guerrilla Hunters: Irregular Conflicts During the Civil War, editors Brian D. McKnight and Barton A. Myers have assembled an impressive collection of fifteen essays from a diverse group of established historians and innovative newcomers to the field of guerrilla studies. The authors approach the subject of irregular fighters during the Civil War from variegated perspectives, but each in his or her own way contributes something meaningful to the discussion.

If there is a single underlying theme to this collection, it is the diversity of irregular warfare during the Civil War. Each essay drives home the point that guerrilla/irregular troops varied greatly in form and appearance and adapted different tactics to suit their particular circumstances. In one fascinating case study, Laura June Davis shows how the Confederacy’s riverine guerrillas waged a devastating campaign of sabotage and arson that destroyed at least forty steamboats on the lower Mississippi River, disrupting Union military operations along the river and sowing economic chaos throughout the region. Likewise, Scott Thompson classifies three different types of irregular cavalry units—guerrillas, partisan companies, and “regular raiders”—that fought in one northern Virginia county (p. 128).

Some of the more famous guerrilla leaders, like Nathan Bedford Forrest, bristled at being labeled as such. As Brian Steel Wills demonstrates in his insightful profile of the legendary Tennessee cavalryman, Forrest abjured the term guerrilla, consistently affirming his commitment to the “rules of Civilized Warfare” that supposedly bound the regular troops of either army (p. 62). Others, like John Gatewood, embraced the chaos the war brought to “failed state” regions like northern Georgia and became, as Adam H. Domby argues, something closer to a Somali warlord than a Confederate partisan fighting for his country (p. 154).

Of course, even the troops of the so-called regular armies could intimidate and abuse noncombatants. As Lisa Tendrich Frank argues in her study of the Union army’s home front campaigns in Georgia, the Carolinas, and Virginia in 1864 and 1865, Federal troops increasingly targeted the homes and property of white southern women for theft and destruction. Perhaps they did so because by that time commanders on either side recognized enemy households as the primary sources of supplies and military intelligence that sustained irregular troops in the field, as Matthew C. Hulbert and Andrew Fialka show us. Hulbert applies the concept of “household warfare” to reinterpret the infamous Lawrence Massacre as a series of individual massacres happening independently throughout the Kansas town (p. 265). Fialka applies his groundbreaking “spatiotemporal” methodology to argue persuasively that General Thomas Ewing’s infamous General Orders No. 11 successfully eradicated guerrilla resistance in the western Missouri border counties by depriving rebel irregulars of their most vital source of supplies and military intelligence: rebel households (p. 10).
Aside from their focus on households, Hulbert and Fialka share an emphasis on the purposefulness of irregular warfare that depicts escalating guerrilla violence as the result of deliberate choices by rational actors. Likewise, in his examination of guerrilla violence in Appalachia, Brian D. McKnight describes how guerrilla service appealed to the self-interest of individual partisan fighters, which in most cases became the underlying motive behind their decisions to become guerrillas. In his profile of Unionist guerrilla leader David “Tinker Dave” Beaty in East Tennessee, Aaron Astor uses innovative new tools of social network analysis to demonstrate that the pro-Union irregulars usually fought with Beaty because of kinship, vengeance, and personal protection.

Barton A. Myers and Stephen Rockenbach emphasize how governments contributed to escalating guerrilla violence. Myers describes how Confederate military authorities, who initially supported “partisan ranger” companies, gradually came to view them as a “self-inflicted wound” that caused havoc on the Confederate home front while draining manpower from the regular Confederate army (p. 30). Likewise, Rockenbach argues that Abraham Lincoln’s emancipation and Confederate amnesty policies escalated partisan violence in Kentucky, accidentally suppressing free speech by Unionists and emancipationists in that state.

Matthew M. Stith and Joseph M. Beilein Jr. attribute escalating guerrilla violence to external factors, not to any individual or government. Stith stresses that the environment of the trans-Mississippi West—its hills, forests, brush, and swamps—exacerbated the human costs of the war by forcing guerrilla-hunting regular troops to adopt scorched-earth tactics and target the civilian communities that sustained the irregular fighters in the bush. For his part, Beilein confirms the influence of alcohol in steeling the “wild men and heavy drinkers” of Missouri’s guerrilla war to commit violence for their cause and afterward to help them cope with the psychological fallout of their atrocities (p. 237).

Men who sought refuge in alcohol typically had good reason to desire escape, as northern troops often discovered when tasked with occupying areas infested with guerrillas. Such troops, Andrew F. Lang argues, often underwent an intellectual change in order to survive, abandoning romantic nineteenth-century notions of civilized warfare and the “citizen-soldier ideal” and embracing an ethos of total war more suitable to their experiences (p. 305). This volume concludes with an essay by esteemed Civil War historian Earl J. Hess, who attempts to place America’s experience with guerrilla conflict during the Civil War in a global context, comparing that experience with similar conflicts in French-occupied Spain, British-occupied Ireland and Malaya, and French-occupied Algeria. Hess finds that irregular insurgencies were far more common and far less effective than most military historians generally recognize.

The essays in this collection are for the most part strong, and several make original, insightful contributions to this field. That being said, if there is one noticeable shortcoming, it is the lack of a clear organizing principle. In their introduction the editors offer what they see as several “penetrating arguments” these essays collectively advance (p. 4). But these arguments feel a bit contrived, almost as though they decided what the collection would be about after receiving the submissions. For example, one is that conventional Civil War historians have been reluctant to engage with guerrilla scholarship because it unsettles narratives their readers “expect to see from a war they believe they
know” (p. 4). This is true, but it is also about as redundant an observation as there is in this field.

Ozarks Technical Community College

Matthew Hernando


Richard M. Reid’s edited volume of the memories of Union medical cadet Burt Green Wilder is slim, but it is packed with useful insights and anecdotes for historians of Civil War medicine. Prefaced by a cogent state-of-the-field introduction and excellent contextualization, the memoir is presented much as its author left it, full of notes to self, appendixes, and bits and bobs from comrades’ letters and diaries. While these qualities could mean a confusing collection, the result is actually an even more useful book for researchers. For example, a fascinating excerpt from one of Wilder’s former comrades is included verbatim. Wilder clearly disagreed with his comrade’s depiction of their working conditions and the war, and he annotated that excerpt to say so. The reader gets both perspectives in one place, a unique way for a historian to explore how two men might remember the same experience differently.

Medical cadets are not particularly well understood, but Wilder’s memoir helps shed some light on their unique position within the Union army’s medical structure. Wilder was bright, ambitious, and eager to learn, and he quickly began doing research work for John Hill Brinton, a senior officer in the Army Medical Department and future director of the United States Army Medical Museum. Wilder collected specimens for the museum, even describing his interactions with the father of a soldier whose brain was taken for the collection. Yet Wilder was not so desperate to advance; when he was offered a smaller salary than he had been promised for a position in the United States Army Medical Museum, Wilder quit.

The recollections capture the experiences of a hardworking and inquisitive young man enthralled by the medical challenge that the war presented. It appears that the image on the book’s cover is not Burt Wilder but another medical cadet named James Rundlett May. Reid’s editorial work helps contextualize and clarify the unfinished original memoir. If I could ask for anything more, it would be to have a slightly shorter historiographical introduction and more of a biographical sketch of the very intriguing Burt Wilder. This volume will be of great use to Civil War medical historians hoping to reconstruct life in Union hospitals or the nature of medical support work.

Buffalo, New York

Sarah Handley-Cousins


Andrew Jackson’s nephew Andrew Jackson Donelson served in several executive branch posts. As Jackson’s personal secretary, Donelson was deeply