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Review Essay

Senses and Sensibility: The Civil War as Lived Experience

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Mark M. Smith, *The Smell of Battle, the Taste of Siege: A Sensory History of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, £19.49). Pp. xii + 197. ISBN 978 0 1997 5998 9

Anne Sarah Rubin, *Through the Heart of Dixie: Sherman's March and American Memory* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014, $35.00). Pp. xiii + 392. ISBN 978 1 4696 1777 0

Graham T. Dozier, ed., *A Gunner in Lee's Army: The Civil War Letters of Thomas Henry Carter* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014, $39.95). Pp. xxii + 344. ISBN 978 1 4696 1874 6

Among wartime and postwar Americans, North and South, an appetite to narrate their experiences of preserving Union or achieving state sovereignty is reflected in their many accounts of the coming of the Civil War, its fighting, and its aftermath. Private letters from the home front and front line were regularly written and received; despite shortages of paper and ink, diaries and journals were diligently kept, recording experiences at both local and state levels; and memoirs and reminiscences, usually written many years after the events they describe, were produced for regional, national, and even international literary markets. These eyewitness accounts from a wide range of historical actors offer scholars, students, and general readers a remarkably detailed, intimate, and valuable glimpse of lived experience during four years of fighting that shaped a nation.

Drawing heavily on these types of historical evidence, the three books reviewed here explore how and in what ways the Civil War was felt, narrated, and remembered. Mark Smith's *The Smell of Battle, the Taste of Siege* offers a sensory history of well-known events and incidents during the conflict to uncover how the sights, smells, and sounds of a nation at war affected sensibilities and altered ideas about the self and society. Anne Sarah Rubin's book *Through the Heart of Dixie* focusses on Sherman's march through Georgia and the Carolinas, offering a critical reading of various forms of cultural transmission to consider the complexities of war and remembrance from multiple perspectives. In *A Gunner in Lee's Army*, Graham Dozier presents an

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edition of letters from a Virginia artillerist, a revealing primary source on wartime service with the Army of Northern Virginia.

The Smell of Battle, the Taste of Siege examines how the Civil War "rearranged the sensory experiences of the participants," soldiers, sailors, civilians, women, children, and the enslaved (6). No simple catalogue of evidences relating to the sensate past, what Smith provides is a historicized sensory analysis of carefully selected moments during the war to reveal how northerners and southerners, individually and collectively, grappled with the war's physical force and felt intensity.

Each chapter is focussed on one of the five senses. Smith listens, first, to the port city of Charleston, before, during, and after secession from the Union. Antebellum Charleston was an important economic, religious, and cultural centre where the slaveholding elite insisted on a dominance hierarchy to maintain social order and obedience, especially from the city's large black population. White Charlestonians, then, regulated the city's soundscape, from the "hum and bustle of commercial activity" (15) to the "quiet, noiseless movement" of restless slaves (17). However, with the election of Abraham Lincoln in November 1860, Charleston underwent an "auditory revolution," as city streets and public venues filled with "vocal, loud, boisterous, strident talk, at a decibel level not heard in generations" (18). When disunion was ratified at a state convention in the city a month later, crowds and military bands gathered to celebrate raucously; church bells were rung, guns were fired, bonfires and fireworks were lit. "Martial sounds became part of everyday life," as the city's inhabitants prepared for war (30). If war engages all the senses, as Smith contends, then "sound dominated" Charleston during the artillery bombardment of Fort Sumter, "overlaying a new soundtrack on the city" (36). As Smith asserts, "the loudest four years on American soil" had begun (38).

The old adage that seeing is believing was sorely tested at the First Bull Run, the war's inaugural battle, in July 1861. Confederate General P. G. T. Beauregard, like his Union counterpart, General Irvin McDowell, "had been taught … that the ability to see the battlefield, to visually imagine where troops were and would be, gave them a perspective essential for victory" (43). As civilian and journalist eyewitnesses looked on, confused Union and Confederate soldiers, many of them disoriented by smoke, dust, and unfamiliar terrain, struggled to identify friend from foe amid variegated uniforms that had yet to be standardized. The "sensory overload and sensory irritation" at Manassas, especially the mayhem caused by the altered way things looked, Smith argues, was partly responsible for the battle's outcome (48). Interspersed with other olfactory experiences of Gettysburg, Smith uses the letters of Cornelia Hancock, a nurse from New Jersey, to see the famous battle through smell. The odious stench of death, as dead bodies and horses, on an unprecedented scale, decomposed in the summer sunshine, "robbed the battlefield of its glory[,] the survivors of their victory[,] and the wounded of what little chance of life was left to them" (79). The sense of taste is explored during the seven-week siege of Vicksburg where the city's beleaguered inhabitants, some of whom sheltered in hastily excavated caves and tunnels, were reduced to eating mule flesh, rats, and birds, and drinking polluted water. Affluent whites, forced to abandon the gustatory excesses to which they were accustomed, felt the deprivations of siege warfare acutely. Their "reduction in diet was closely related to the humiliation of a social class," posits Smith (111). The final chapter, on touch, examines life aboard the *H. L. Hunley*, a Confederate submarine, during its mission to torpedo a Union blockader in Charleston Harbour. The eight crewmembers "lived in a dim, shadowy world"

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(116), one of "extreme confinement," Smith explains (117). Other than handshaking, nineteenth-century American men did not normally touch each other. Yet the *Hunley*'s claustrophobic space brought the sailors together in close human contact, a damp, sweaty compaction that Smith likens, somewhat ironically, to conditions aboard slave ships during the Middle Passage.

In a short epilogue, Smith brings the senses together with an account of General William T. Sherman's 1864 Georgia campaign. Sherman's army of battle-hardened veterans "were a sensory assault on the South," we are told, as they unleashed the hard hand of total war on white southern civilians (139). For African Americans, however, Sherman's marches "brought the sensory signatures of freedom," as enslaved men, women, and children escaped to his lines. If the Civil War "began with a bang," then, for the Confederacy at least it "ended with deafening silence," the reality of defeat (144). By focussing on the "sensory turn," Smith asks new questions of abundant first-person evidence to show how important sound, sight, smell, taste, and touch were to nineteenth-century Americans' emotional response to their Civil War experience (151). By his own admission, there is still much to be learned from such an approach.

Anne Sarah Rubin's book, *Through the Heart of Dixie*, examines Sherman's March to the Sea in history and memory. Less concerned with the military and strategic impact of the campaign on the course of the war than numerous other books have been, Rubin traces instead the "myriad ways in which Americans have retold and reimagined" Sherman's march as it moved inexorably across Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina, animating some of the tensions between these stories' connections and contradictions (4).

Rubin begins with an examination of the Georgia and Carolinas campaign, using letters, diaries, memoirs, and official documents to outline the principal battles, skirmishes, and encounters. Here the cast of characters is a familiar one, from Confederate diarists Dolly Lunt Burge and Emma LeConte, to Union soldiers Henry Hitchcock and George Nichols, and the Jones family of Liberty County, Georgia. From Atlanta to Savannah, from the swamps of South Carolina to Columbia and northwards, Sherman's marchers landed punch after punch on the Confederacy's soft belly.

In the next three chapters, Rubin turns her attention to postwar stories of the march. First, Rubin identifies two patterns or tropes in white southerners' stories of Sherman: victimization and defiance. Preyed upon by Union soldiers, white southerners, especially women, offered vivid descriptions of raids, tense standoffs, sexual assaults, thievery, and wanton destruction of property and livestock. Such stories, Rubin argues, "painted white Southerners as helpless victims, inadvertently displaying weakness in a society that prized strength, appearance, and honor over all else" (47). To offset this, other stories cast Yankees as uncouth ruffians whom white southerners routinely – and ingeniously – outwitted. Whether hiding valuables and other possessions or openly defying their northern invaders, these tales, or salvation stories, allowed southern whites to elevate a sense of "pride and superiority" over their conquerors (47). Over time, Rubin informs us, tales of kindness and generosity, usually involving Union soldiers' interactions with southern women and children, emerged in a spirit of sectional reconciliation and reunion, binding erstwhile enemies together. For African Americans, Sherman's march facilitated the liberation of thousands of enslaved people, but it also meant deprivation and dispossession, and their stories reflect this ambiguity. Using the problematic Works Project Administration (WPA)

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slave interviews, Rubin shows how Sherman and his soldiers do not fit easily "into a binary of either liberators or pillagers in terms of their relationship to blacks" (80). Rubin also explores white-authored tales of the faithful slave, a favourite literary strategy of Lost Cause nostalgics, which traded effortlessly on images of slavery's benignity and idealized southern race relations. According to Rubin, for their part, Union soldiers (including Sherman) were hesitant, occasionally grudging, emancipators, as evidenced by the abandonment of several hundred former slaves in December 1864 at Ebenezer Creek in Georgia. Of the Union soldiers, or "bummers," who reflected on their time in Sherman's army in stories, speeches, and other statements, many remembered the campaign in a "celebratory fashion" (98). Other veterans pointed to the "moral righteousness and purpose" of the march, taking aim at the sentimentality of the Lost Cause and its tightening grip on Civil War memory (100).

Sherman, "a master at self-creation and self-definition," also proved adept at fashioning a cultural memory of the Civil War, not least how he wanted the march, and the men who participated in it, to be remembered (121). Drawing on Sherman's memoirs, first published in 1875, Rubin discusses areas of historical controversy that the general wished to settle, especially Columbia's conflagration and his original surrender terms to General Joseph Johnston (which had been initially endorsed by Lincoln but were later rescinded following the President's assassination). Rubin then deftly traces changing perceptions of Sherman from white southerners during the postwar period, from the warm welcome he received during an 1879 tour of the South, through his participation in Atlanta's 1881 International Cotton Exposition, to Jefferson Davis's blistering attack in *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*. Not everyone could separate the wartime "Merchant of Terror" from peacetime "Uncle Billy."

Rubin's final three chapters examine images of Sherman's march in tourism, and in song, fiction, and film. Northern newspapermen who visited the region shortly after the war ended wrote of the ruins, rubble, and remains that marked the southern landscape, as well as the postwar struggles of the South's freedmen. Travellers during the Gilded Age and beyond "tended to remark on the enduring poverty of the region and were quick to attribute that to Sherman," Rubin writes (164). Rubin reads late twentieth-century travel accounts from authors who physically retraced Sherman's march as journeys of "self-discovery," a search for a "measure of peace and healing" to alleviate personal tragedy (172). Sherman's march was also put to music, in songs such as "Sherman's March to the Sea" and "Marching through Georgia," and celebrated in verse, often in praise of Sherman's soldiers. A well-known photographic representation of the march, George Barnard's 1866 collection *Photographic Views of Sherman's Campaign*, presented "a picturesque and pastoral view of the South," and influenced how the military operation was viewed (192). As book and film, *Gone with the Wind* featured Sherman's march in famous scenes, most notably with the burning of Atlanta and Scarlett O'Hara's confrontation with Union soldiers at Tara plantation. Though Sherman does not appear on page or screen, as Rubin reminds us *Gone with the Wind*, more than any other cultural artefact, has shaped popular understanding of Sherman's march and, by extension, the Civil War and Reconstruction, since its release eighty years ago.

Thomas Henry Carter was a young, talented, and ambitious artillery officer in the Army of Northern Virginia. Expertly edited and annotated by Graham Dozier, managing editor of publications at the Virginia Historical Society, Carter's surviving wartime letters, written primarily to his wife, span June 1861 to March 1865. The

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historical value of these personal missives lies in their immediacy. Time-sensitive conversations between regular, close correspondents, Carter's letters, Dozier states, unlike post-Civil War memoirs and reminiscences, are "not colored by knowledge of the [war's] outcome, by the passage of time, or … by decades of postwar reflection" (2).

Descended from a long and venerable line of Virginia's leading families, Carter was born in 1831 at Pampatike, a prosperous corn and wheat plantation on the north bank of the Pamunkey river in King William County. Upon his graduation from the Virginia Military Institute in 1849, Carter enrolled in the medical schools at the University of Virginia and the University of Pennsylvania, completing degrees in both institutions, and practiced for a while in a Philadelphia hospital. Following the death of his father's overseer, Carter returned home and in 1854 assumed the management of Pampatike, including supervision of the plantation's enslaved workforce, and reestablished himself as a gentleman farmer. After a brief courtship, he married Susan Elizabeth Roy in 1855. When secession and war came to the commonwealth, Carter formed an artillery battery, began recruiting the company, and on 1 June 1861 accepted his commission as captain of the King William Artillery. After nearly four years of service in which he commanded gunners in most of the principal campaigns of the Army of Northern Virginia, Carter ended the war, then a colonel, as chief of artillery in the 2nd Corps.

Carter's letters home on matters political and personal are articulate, candid, and revealing. He could be – and was – sharply critical, and even derogatory, towards Confederate government leaders ("These politicians will ruin any government on earth" (90)) and military superiors ("the boobies … high in rank" (171)). Carter's opinion of Confederate President Jefferson Davis, whom he considered petty and vindictive, "is going down like mercury in a thermometer [on] a cold day," he admitted (92). Writing home a few months after the First Battle of Bull Run, Carter lamented the "stupidity of not advancing," noting that "the blame is put on Davis' shoulders here" (35). Initially, Carter found General Robert E. Lee to be "too cautious," though popular among the generals and other officers (75). He deemed General Joseph E. Johnston "lazy & almost past the age for great deeds," emblematic of "these old Army officers" who "lead an idle life, are paid a stated salary, [and] are promoted in regular order" (53–54). In several letters to his wife, Carter lambasted General Jubal A. Early's leadership during the 1864 Shenandoah Valley Campaign, especially after the Battle of Cedar Creek, noting "on the field [Early] is a disaster, sees nothing with the eye of genius, is slow & do-nothing in policy & always trying to play a safe game" (259).

Carter was critical, too, of the Confederate infantry, especially the apparent lack of discipline in the ranks. In retreat, they were "utterly worthless" and acted like a disorganized mob (256). Conversely, Carter praised the "better discipline" of Union troops, who were, in his estimation, better led, provisioned, and equipped (219). If volunteer armies were problematic, Carter worried that conscription and amendments to terms of enlistment might cause further commotion, uncertainty, and resentment in the ranks.

Susan ran Pampatike in her husband's absence and Carter's letters home advised and encouraged her to "be energetic & economical" in its management (34). Carter admitted that "fear of debt," an "endless source of mortification & misery" for a temperament such as his, troubled him greatly (67). Carter also directed his wife on how to supervise Pampatike's enslaved population and wrote in late 1864 that he favoured the enlistment of black soldiers to support the Confederacy's military struggle.

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Interspersed with such remarks, readers learn of Carter's deep emotional bond with Susan. As the war dragged on he admitted to his wife that he had "never so fully as now understood the [v]oid in a man's heart when there is no one in whom he can repose entire confidence & to whom he can tell the inmost secrets of his heart" (186). Like many Civil War fighting men, Carter struggled with homesickness, admitting that his "spirits are so depressed at times" (103). In other men, however, Carter found similar emotional reaction to be "childish" (46), noting the case of one individual under his command who had been "whining with homesickness until everyone of any spirit has been disgusted" (47). Toward physically wounded men, Carter was more sympathetic. "The empty sleeve or pants leg should be the passport to attention & respect" (232).

Following Lee's retreat and surrender at Appomattox Court House, Carter returned home to King William County and to Pampatike, where his family and a few slaves remained. He established a school for boys there in 1868, which Susan ran, to supplement their dwindling farming income. Thereafter he served for many years as a commissioner of railroads in Virginia and later as proctor and superintendent of grounds and buildings at the University of Virginia until ill health forced his retirement. By the 1880s and 1890s, Carter, like many other Confederate veterans, had also become active in memorializing and commemorating the Confederacy, attended reunions and monument unveilings, and occasionally committed his wartime recollections to print.

Dozier introduces the collection with an impressively researched biographical essay, and begins each chapter with a brief summary of Carter's wartime experiences and those of his artillery command. The letters themselves are supplemented by Dozier's exhaustive research, as evidenced by his comprehensive footnotes that helpfully identify people and place names. There are, unfortunately, some significant gaps within Carter's letters: the Seven Days Battles, the Battle of Gettysburg, and the Overland Campaign. Regardless of these lacunae, Dozier's edition of Carter's letters is an important addition to the literature on the Army of Northern Virginia.

Taken together, these books remind us of the importance of "'felt' history," as Robert Penn Warren so memorably put it, in framing sensory environments, cultural legacies, and rhetorical exchanges between soldiers and civilians, men and women, and blacks and whites during the Civil War era and beyond.

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