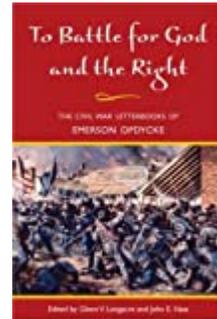




Glenn V. Longacre, John E. Haas, eds. *To Battle for God and the Right: The Civil War Letterbooks of Emerson Opdycke*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003. xxv + 332 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02774-1.



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## Courage, Conviction, and Career: Emerson Opdycke's Civil War Letters

Archivists Glenn Longacre and John E. Haas have provided the world of Civil War scholarship with a fine resource in the form of the war letters of Emerson Opdycke. This collection contains the 300 letters he wrote between August 31, 1861 and August 29, 1865 to his wife, Lucy. Opdycke's letters were taken up with the task of answering Lucy's many questions regarding war aims, battle strategies, the intrigues of army leadership, and her husband's prospects for advancement. The dialogical and intimate character of these entries caused Opdycke to reflect frequently on the war's larger aims and his place within it.

In many ways, Opdycke's war experience was typical. Similar to most of his contemporaries, he left a mundane civilian life for the adventure of military service. And like many others, he achieved notable success. Opdycke, a struggling businessman from the northeastern Ohio town of Warren, helped organize a volunteer army company. On August 26, 1861, Company A of the Forty-First OVI was mustered into service; it elected Opdycke its first lieutenant. From this humble and ordinary start Lieutenant Opdycke's story reflected the mil-

itary career of many other successful officers: a combination of hard work, courage, and good fortune enabled him to reach the rank of brigadier general by the time he officially resigned his commission on January 1, 1866.

To highlight the ordinariness of Opdycke's military career is not to denigrate his accomplishments or dismiss his courage and valor. On the contrary, the almost understated description of his combat experiences underscores his bravery under fire. At Shiloh, for example, he described how he, at the peak of battle, moved out in front of his troops to reorganize the lines and coordinate their volleys. "I several times stepped out, to the points of the bayonets, of the front rank, when our whole line, and the rebels also, were firing their best. Whenever I was in front of the regiment, I felt safest, because I was doing my whole duty, as an officer, and a soldier" (p. 33). He demonstrated courageous and effective leadership. At Missionary Ridge, for instance, he recounted his efforts to push his men forward. "Many of the men were cowardly, and I was obliged to ride zigzagingly forcing these fellows up from behind stumps, logs, trees some of them would call out 'Oh I am wounded, my leg is broke'

when I would order them to show me, where it was broken, and 'I couldnt see it'. A little pricking with the point of the sword would generally send such cowards up the hill" (p. 135). Opdycke fought in many of the western theater's bloodiest battles. In addition to Shiloh and Missionary Ridge (Chattanooga), he saw major action at Chickamauga, Atlanta, and Franklin.

It is not, however, Emerson Opdycke's courage under fire or even his impressive, albeit typical, ascent up the military command structure that makes his war letters uniquely valuable. Rather, these letters are noteworthy because they express his views of the war's larger meaning and they reveal how he merged his personal ambitions with his understanding of the conflict's broader purposes.

Regarding Opdycke's sense of the war's larger meaning, he viewed the conflict as a holy crusade for righteousness and justice. As he observed in his second letter to Lucy, "Who would not be willing to give his life, if necessary, in such a contest? Yes, and who would not be willing to say 'God Speed you' to brother, son, or husband, when they leave all the endearments of home, to battle for God, and the Right" (p. 2). Opdycke, of course, was not the first one to declare the religious nature of the war; indeed, he reflected the convictions of abolitionists and many others. What makes Opdycke's expression of the holy nature of the war particularly intriguing, however, was his deeply Calvinistic view of the conflict. In April 1864, he insisted on the inevitability of the Union's victory, in spite of evidence to the contrary, because of God's will and justice. "My faith is firm that our triumph at some future period is as certain as that God is; but the sins of our people are greater, and the maximum of our suffering may not be reached for many months yet. We can only submit to the will of Deity as becomes children who are dependent upon Him for everything" (p. 166). Opdycke's confidence was rooted in Calvinistic convictions that God was sovereign, that divine justice could not be denied, and that the Almighty would punish those who resisted his will until they conformed to his ways. He believed in the redemptive power of suffering. In the midst of the seemingly endless Atlanta campaign he observed, "such a sea of blood ought to regenerate any people" (p. 217). Curiously, Lincoln himself adhered to this view. As historian Ronald White has recently pointed out in *Lincoln's Greatest Speech*, this was a major theme in the president's second inaugural address. Moreover, occasional comments reveal that Opdycke's religious devotion went beyond rhetoric and influenced daily behavior. For instance, at one point he described a conversation he

had with a fellow officer. "Col. Moore [said] that I had been a benefit to him, religiously as well as in other ways. I could only express my astonishment as such strong language, for he seemed perfectly sincere" (p. 228).

Opdycke, of course, linked the war's religious character with the abolition of slavery. "I have no doubt of the final result; but it seems now as though we should be kept at it until the whole North demands the extinction of Slavery.... The South will fight, until conquered, and crushed; in order to do this, Slavery must go out" (p. 37). He declared his Calvinistic confidence in the righteous victory of God's will through the destruction of slavery when he wrote to Lucy from the Kenesaw Mountain battlefield. "The sacrifices that are now being made for Justice, and Right, can never be fully written out, but God knows, and the Right must triumph in the end" (p. 185).

Opdycke merged his view of the war as a holy crusade with his desire for promotion. The way he dovetailed his understanding of the conflict's broader aims with his personal ambition provides intriguing insight into the motives and views of Civil War soldiers. After the September 1863 Union disaster at Chickamauga, for instance, Opdycke defended the efforts of his own regiment and leadership with these words. "I have only done my duty, and no one ought to do less, when such vast issues are at stake. If I ever do have command of one [brigade], and then opportunity offers, I will make you the wife of a General! I would do anything honorable to destroy this 'slave holder's rebellion'" (p. 108). Opdycke believed his fidelity to the war's great end of abolishing slavery would lead to promotion. He acknowledged his strong desire for advancement and apparently saw no contradiction between his divine duty and his zeal for worldly military promotion. Late in the conflict, in spite of a war-long record of bravery and inspired leadership, the rank of general continued to elude him. Writing to Lucy on February 1, 1865, he admitted his intense desire for recognition. "Still that does not satisfy me [command of a brigade]. I do not suppose it is my nature to rest satisfied with anything long. If I was a general commanding a division this moment I feel sure that I would soon want a Corps;" (p. 277).

These are the types of entries and insights that make Emerson Opdycke's letters of singular worth. The volume's notable weak point concerns its lack of maps. Maps that traced the deployment of Opdycke's regiments and brigades, as well as a few detailed maps of key battles, are especially needed. Without these aids, the book's worth to the non-specialist is diminished. Opdycke's let-

ters would, for example, serve as a helpful compliment to James McPherson's *For Cause and Comrades* in an undergraduate course on the Civil War; however, without maps its value is reduced. Notwithstanding this shortcoming, *To Battle for God and the Right* is an important work that offers fresh perspectives and insights.

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