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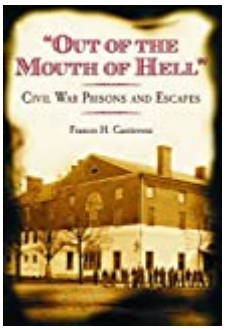
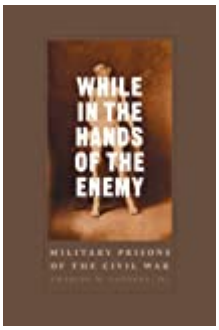


Frances H. Casstevens. *"Out of the Mouth of Hell": Civil War Prisons and Escapes.* Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2005. viii + 376 pp. $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7864-2072-8.



Charles W. Sanders, Jr. *While in the Hands of the Enemy: Military Prisons of the Civil War.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005. x + 390 pp. $44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-3061-2.

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Civil War Prisons and the Assessment of Responsibility

At what point do squalor and death transcend the uncontrollable nature of war and become a reflection of consciously abusive administrative policy? Whether the subject of study is Civil War prison camps or such contemporary facilities as Abu-Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, assessment of responsibility remains a central issue of contention in any discussion about prisoners of war. Individuals and administration officials both play a role in the policies and practices associated with operating wartime prisons and should be held accountable for their degree of responsibility for the treatment or mistreatment of prisoners. Within the historiography of the Civil War, however, a general consensus has long existed which has, to an extent, removed individuals and governments from responsibility for the misery and deaths that occurred at places like Andersonville and Camp Douglas. Influenced by a pattern of postwar sectional reconciliation that shaped many aspects of the war's history, and a desire to refrain from such abuses of justice as occurred in the Henry Wirz trial, the conventional assessment has viewed conditions at these prisons as unfortunate but unavoidable developments of war–a reflection more of

the uncontrollable and inhumane nature of war in general, rather than a conscious and intentional expression of man's inhumanity to man. According to this explanation, the North was not to blame for conditions at places like Camp Douglas; the Dix-Hill cartel broke down because of the South's refusal to exchange black Union soldiers as equals, which in turn transformed the North's prisons into overcrowded incubators of death. Likewise, the South cannot be blamed for conditions at Andersonville or elsewhere; the starving Confederacy could barely feed its own soldiers in the field, much less a growing population of enemy prisoners whose own government refused their exchange. Although tragic, no one on either side of the conflict was personally responsible for the misery and death associated with the numerous camps that housed prisoners during the war.

Charles W. Sanders Jr. challenges this assessment in *While in the Hands of the Enemy: Military Prisons of the Civil War* and boldly condemns both the Union and Confederate governments for the incompetent and abusive character of their respective prisoner of war systems. Sanders does not accept the characterization of camp conditions as unfortunate but uncontrollable or unintentional. By focusing his analysis on both prison systems as a whole, Sanders attempts to shift the discussion beyond the heartrending experiences of individual prisoners or the actions of individual camp commandants and toward the high-ranking officials who shaped and administered prison policy. Sanders examines the development and evolution of four major prisons from each belligerent and, in a thorough comparative analysis, concludes that the deplorable conditions were part of a mutually inhumane and conscious policy of mistreatment that escalated through the course of the war.

Sanders examines prisoner policies from the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, and the Mexican War, and demonstrates that a pattern of diplomatic issues, ineffective administration, and intentional abuse underlay the history of wartime prison management prior to the Civil War. Rather than learning from these mistakes of the past, Sanders argues, the Union and Confederate governments repeated and expanded upon the earlier pattern of abuse. Shortages and unanticipated difficulties certainly added to the problems inherent to the situation, but these difficulties were also consciously absorbed into the fabric of poor management; they became the foundation of skillfully manipulated rhetoric to justify reductions in facilities, food, and medical supplies–all of which, ultimately, caused death rates in all prisons to skyrocket in 1864. Each side, Sanders argues, increasingly viewed prisoners "not as men, but as mere pawns to be used and then callously discarded in pursuit of national objectives" (p. 2).

In terms of individual responsibility, Sanders casts a wide net of culpability. In the North, the infamously parsimonious Commissary General of Prisoners Col. William Hoffman is held accountable for much of the daily misery experienced by Confederate inmates in Union camps. Likewise, Gen. John H. Winder, Confederate Provost Marshal in Richmond, comes under considerable scrutiny for a pattern of poor planning and site selection that made humane care of Union prisoners virtually impossible. Ultimately, however, Sanders sees Hoffman and Winder as "frustrated by a system that was quick to enlarge responsibilities while denying the requisite authority to carry them out" (p.128); although both men added to the problems of their respective systems, Sanders views them as cogs in a large and uncaring bureaucratic machinery.

It is Sanders's attention to the roles played by those at the highest levels of the Union and Confederate government, however, which will create the most interest and potential debate. Secretaries of War Edwin M. Stanton and James A. Seddon, as well as Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis all receive a measure of rebuke for their explicit and implicit roles in the creation of this "national sin" (p. 316). Sanders' interpretation of the evolution of prison policy also serves as a new voice in the ongoing discussion over the nature of "total warfare," especially in terms of the pattern of escalation and the rhetorical justifications issued by each side. For example, Sanders questions the fundamental nature of the North's response to the Confederate policy regarding the status of black Union soldiers. Traditionally seen as a principled stance in support of the rights of black soldiers as prisoners, Sanders sees a political manipulation at work. He argues that Union leaders used the issue as a convenient justification for breaking off the Dix-Hill cartel, thereby simultaneously weakening the field strength of the Confederate army and shifting the inevitable public blame to the South for the fact that northern soldiers continued to languish in Confederate prisons. Also called into question is the traditional apology for the want of provisions in Southern camps. To Sanders, the heart of the problem was not the Confederacy's supposed lack of supplies, but official "incompetence and a criminal lack of concern" (p. 226) for prisoner welfare that prevented the distribution of available supplies. Sanders points to Confederate stockpiles of supplies that remained in storage despite their proximity to railroads and prisons. He

acknowledges the eventual destruction of these supplies by Union cavalry, but believes they could have been distributed long before their destruction. Since the supplies were distributed neither to Union prisoners nor Confederate soldiers it seems debatable as to whether this particular example stands as evidence of a conscious policy of neglect and retaliation via denial of basic necessities, or as evidence of a general bureaucratic incompetence that also proved a detriment to the needs of the Confederacy's own soldiers.

There is some repetition in the narrative, such as frequent references to the brigantine "Jeff Davis" and the issue of national sovereignty versus de facto recognition of secession, but this does not distract from a thoroughly researched and articulate argument. *While in the Hands of the Enemy* is a welcome and important contribution to the study of Civil War prison administration. By challenging old assumptions Sanders has helped to refocus historiographical attention on the issue of responsibility at both the personal and administrative levels. As additional studies of individual camps emerge, they will have to reconcile themselves with the arguments put forth by Sanders. Just as the initial scapegoating of Andersonville's Henry Wirz has been reevaluated, so too the old apologies and reluctance to assess individual and governmental responsibility will no longer suffice as complete explanations for the mismanagement of prison camps. Mismanagement and conscious abuse within individual camps have to be assessed as symptoms of similar inadequacies at a systematic level.

"Out of the Mouth of Hell": Civil War Prisons and Escapes is a collection of short descriptions and anecdotes about twenty-seven major Union and Confederate prison camps. Each chapter focuses on one specific prison and provides the basic details of the facility's date of establishment, type, location, number and kind of prisoners, famous inmates, and known escapes. Also included are a number of photographs of released federal prisoners that are as haunting as any previously seen. Although the subtitle indicates a particular focus on escapes, the descriptions are so brief that they fail to provide any real insight into the specific escapes or the general concept of a prisoner's duty to attempt escape.

Despite the brevity of the chapters, the often abrupt shifts in discussion, and several typographical errors, *"Out of the Mouth of Hell"* is a useful introductory reference work, particularly for information related to those major prison facilities that still await a more detailed individual study.

Although Andersonville continues to command the bulk of popular and academic attention in the genre of Civil War prison history, other significant camps have recently been the focus of specific study. This trend not only increases understanding of the difficulties faced at each facility, by captors and captives alike, but may also contribute to the debate about the existence of a system-wide policy of conscious administrative neglect and abuse.

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