

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Jack D. Welsh. *Medical Histories of Union Generals*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1997. xx + 422 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87338-552-7.

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Before reading Jack Welsh's *Medical Histories of Union Generals*, I was tempted to take a review of the companion piece, *Medical Histories of Confederate Generals* (1995) that I wrote in 1995 for H-CivWar and merely exchange "Union" for "Confederate" and be finished. That, of course, would be gross academic negligence. Nevertheless, this review greatly imitates the review of its companion in many respects because the two volumes suffer many of the same flaws.

In *Medical Histories of Union Generals*, Jack Welsh has attempted to collect a complete medical case history for each of the 583 Federal generals listed in Ezra Warner's *Generals in Blue*. This was undoubtedly a monumental task, and Welsh is to be congratulated for undertaking such a project.

Medical Histories of Union Generals is not a book to be read cover to cover. Rather, it is a reference work of a broad and general nature to be consulted and perhaps to be used as a source to begin research. The field of Civil War medicine is growing as other topics are exhausted or over-analyzed, and Welsh's work is a fine piece of initial scholarship for other historians to explore in greater depth.

The medical case histories were collected from many sources. Welsh was able to construct each from West Point cadet records, Mexican War and Florida service records, frontier service records, correspondence, and a wide array of post-Civil War sources.

Where this book falls short of being a significant and lasting piece is best described in Welsh's own words. He writes: "I have not speculated how their medical problems might have affected their performance or the war, as this is better left to trained military historians. However,

even a brief review of the multiple illnesses and injuries resulting from wounds and accidents would suggest the possible influence poor health had on their field performance" (pp. xi-xii). And that is precisely why this book, and its companion, are so disappointing.

It is easy to see his argument that a general's health might have had a great effect upon performance of duty. Reading William Tecumseh Sherman's medical biography, it is apparent that Welsh was, indeed, allowing the evidence to demonstrate exactly how Sherman's wounds, asthma, and mental debility would effect his performance. And although Sherman's "insanity" is addressed, Ulysses S. Grant's problems with alcoholism, a factor that certainly should have been taken into account in regard to his overall health, are not even mentioned.

Medical Histories of Union Generals does contain two very helpful items. The first, and most useful, is a glossary of medical terms used throughout the book. For readers unfamiliar with many of the modern or nineteenth-century diagnoses, Welsh has provided clear definitions for the current terms and modern explanations for many of the antiquated terms. Also included is a chronology of wartime events which lists accidents, battle-related injuries, and other violent events.

Finally, a great flaw of this work is the fact that Kent State University Press did not choose to include an index (something which greatly marred *Medical Histories of Confederate Generals*, too). Without an index, it is simply impossible to determine how many of the generals suffered from any given malady.

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