

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Robert L. Bee, ed.** *The Boys from Rockville: Civil War Narratives of Sgt. Benjamin Hirst, Company D, 14th Connecticut Volunteers.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998. xxviii + 224 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57233-005-4.



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With the large number of publications and reprints of Civil War letters and diaries today, there is a certain glut on the market, and a problem for reviewers trying to find something remarkable about yet another batch of a soldier's missives to his wife and family or yet another diary by a Southern belle. Still, occasionally a book sticks out by the literary quality of its material, or by the skill of the scholarly presentation. This book does both.

The plural 'Civil War narratives' of Benjamin Hirst already indicates the rare case of a trove of written material containing letters and a diary and later revisions into articles for a local newspaper twenty-two years after the war. Instead of the usual monologue, we get two, and sometimes three versions of the same events, an internal dialogue between one man, so to speak. That in itself is revealing sometimes, and it was a lucky coincidence that Robert L. Bee is not a historian, but an anthropologist, which directed his interest in a different direction from what a traditional historian would have looked for.

Two more factors lift this book out of the stream of publications flowing past: Ben Hirst is an immigrant, and a factory worker. Both features combine to give him a point of view that is sometimes at variance from the usual, and sometimes not. Finally, there is also an endearing moment for fans of more middle-of-the-road stuff: The battles Hirst participates in (which he

vividly describes) are Antietam, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, and, finally, Gettysburg, where his regiment, the 14th Connecticut, is positioned so close to the central portion of the stone wall near the angle that Hirst gets a first-rate view of Pickett's charge. The 14th Connecticut alone captured six battle flags, and though Hirst himself was so wounded as to be put out of the war for the duration, this only happens after the charge is broken, and from a piece of stone hurled up by the scattered firing of Confederate artillery trying to cover the retreat of Pickett's broken column.

What is so interesting about his account of this particular battle, however, is precisely the narrative difference between Gettysburg and the preceding engagements at Antietam, Fredericksburg, and Chancellorsville, as well as the difference between Letter File #69, July 5th, and Letter File #70, October, with the later amendations. Antietam is reported excitedly and with all signs of a "First Blood" experience that the author needs to integrate with his cultural and individual background. Predictably, manliness and courage feature prominently in these lines. Exactly that proves a problem when Hirst goes back with a wounded man during the idiotic charge at Fredericksburg, and later on has to fend off allegations that he was less than courageous in his conduct (p. 78). Bee focuses strongly on the discourse of manliness run-

ning throughout the letters, and he points out how Hirst implicitly and explicitly defends himself, finding new and more elaborate versions to reintegrate what he did with what he aspires to as an ideal. In the 19th century, and for a man like Sgt. Ben Hirst, deciding that to continue was suicide—only one third of the regiment were fit for duty afterwards—and that going back whichever way simply made more sense, is still out of the question (the amount of disorder created by the charge can be gleaned from the fact that at one point two men separated from the unit accidentally came across the 14th's State colors lying on the ground somewhere on the battlefield (p. 66).

After each engagement, Hirst usually sends a shorter letter explaining how he is still alive and doing okay, or who else of the Rockville boys isn't. In the longer "second" letter versions, which Bee reprints with the later amendments interspersed in italics, Ben Hirst does not, as did most of his contemporaries, revel in the conventional and pre-fabricated rhetoric of war. Instead, he often switches to a reporting present tense and tries to write 'action scenes': "Give them hell xxx. Now We've got you. Sock it to the Blasted Rebels. Fredericksburg on the other Leg. Hurah, Hurah, the first Line is broken. Never mind who is Hit. Give them Hell again" (p. 150). It is in these colloquial scenes that some English idioms get mixed in with the otherwise plain Eastern American style, but it is the radio-sports-report tone of the whole passage fifty years before there were radios that is the most puzzling, and fascinating.

Whereas Robert L. Bee as an anthropologist is more interested in the patterns of social interaction and self-image that can be gleaned from the letters, there is a

lot for the literary scholar in the narratives of Benjamin Hirst, born in Stockport, England, in 1828, a weaver by trade, and a sergeant in the Union army. Reading his letters and diaries reinforced my conviction that the whole field of Civil War personal missives should be re-read and investigated by literary scholars. A sizeable percentage of what is in these letters is between the lines, in the construction of personal images and metaphors, histories, and autobiographical myths. And there is, occasionally, a show of literary talent that ought to be appreciated. Robert Bee does draw on the writings of Capt. Samuel Fiske of the same regiment, who wrote a column for the Springfield, Massachusetts, *Republican* during his service, called "Mr. Dunn Browne' Experiences in the Army" to corroborate or contest historical data as well as personal views of affairs. It could also be interesting to compare the different writing modes, the rhetorics of war, the semantization of experiences. But one need not even go as far as that. The gap between the "first" and "second" letters after battles, the difference between what goes into the diary and into a letter, and how and what was added and amended when Ben rewrote his letters for publications after twenty years of civilian life and reminiscing in the G.A.R. – Okay, maybe the literary scholar in me is getting carried away a little. But I am convinced that there is still a lot of interesting work to do with the material Robert L. Bee has edited for all of us with so much care, diligence, and circumspection.

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