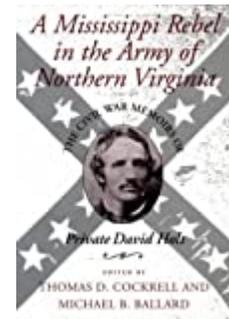


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Thomas D. Cockrell, Michael B. Ballard, eds.** *Mississippi Rebel in the Army of Northern Virginia: The Civil War Memoirs of Private David Holt.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995. xx + 354 pp. \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8071-1981-5.



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**Published on** H-CivWar (May, 1996)

Gerald F. Linderman, in his 1987 book *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War*, discusses a revival of interest in the Civil War during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by those who fought it. The sense of honor and comradeship from their participation in the war led to a large number of writings by former Confederate soldiers, many of whom expounded on southern ideals and even commented on the bravery of Union troops. As Cockrell and Ballard note in their preface “David Holt’s memoir reflects all these trends” (p. xvi). His writing, while partisan, is at once strongly southern in tone and conciliatory toward his former enemies. David Holt wrote out his memoir of growing up in pre-Civil War Mississippi and fighting in the Civil War at the end of a long life, when he was in his eighties. There is always the possibility that one’s memory has faded with age, leading to inaccuracies in such a memoir. Indeed, the editors have noted (and corrected) some errors which might bring into question the accuracy of the balance of this memoir. For example, in his discussion of the retreat from Gettysburg (p. 200) Holt notes his position in the Confederate ranks as “well up on Cemetery Ridge”, which was, of course, the Union position. Throughout the book Holt mentions by name individuals whom the editors try heroically to identify, not always with success. Sometimes Holt’s memories differ from other accounts of particular situations;

in the passage dealing with Malvern Hill at the end of the Seven Days’ battles (p. 88), he suggests that the gunboats used by Union troops did little damage, an opinion corrected by the editors in a footnote. How accurate, then, are lengthy conversations presented as verbatim quotations? The editors have taken great pains to verify names, units, and locations wherever possible. If the reader wishes to remain firmly grounded in reality, it is probably necessary to pay close attention to the editors’ notes throughout this book and to take all the quoted conversations with a certain amount of healthy skepticism. On the other hand, one may view this memoir as an interesting tale, told with a great deal of style by one who participated in the events and who has remembered much. As such, this volume provides great insights into the life of an enlisted member of the Army of Northern Virginia. David Holt was born in 1843 on the family plantation near Woodville, Mississippi, the eighth of ten children. He grew up in a relatively comfortable environment. When the Civil War erupted, Holt enlisted in the Wilkinson Rifles, which would become Company K of the 16th Mississippi Regiment. Too young to leave with this unit when it moved first to Corinth, and then to Virginia to become part of Isaac Trimble’s brigade shortly after First Bull Run, Holt was instead a member of a company composed of boys from fourteen to sixteen years of age, known as “The Cadets.” Permitted to leave the Cadets

and join the Confederate Army in the spring of 1862, he caught up with Company K as it was entering Jackson's Shenandoah Valley campaign. Though both young and small of stature, Holt seemed to survive the rigors of military life in that era, although not without several illnesses that took him out of action for prolonged periods. Through Holt's memory, the reader marches along with the Army of Northern Virginia as it engages in the Seven Days' battles, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, and Petersburg. Holt conjures up vivid pictures of the spartan life of the Confederate soldier and his constant interaction with the forces of nature as well as with the Union Army. We see him forage for all-too-scarce food, joke with his comrades, walk barefoot after his shoes come apart in the mud on the retreat from Gettysburg, sit on a skirmish line awaiting a Yankee charge. Holt's writing, edited several times over the years, captures the spirit of this conflict. Some examples are worth including. While scouting in the black of night in front of Confederate lines at Chancellorsville, Holt hears an advancing line. His description captures well the moment:

I had not gone far before I heard a sound ominous and fearful. It sounded like a mighty rushing wind, coming from beyond the barn. I listened for a few minutes and could make out the rattle of accoutrements and knew it was a line of battle advancing. (p. 174)

The simple act of moving through all sorts of weather without protective gear staggers the modern imagination. Of the return march to Chancellorsville from the fight at Salem Church, Holt writes,

We fell in and commenced to march in the direction of Chancellorsville, just as the sky began to cloud up in a very threatening manner. We had not marched far before it began to rain. No wind [blew], and the rain came in a steady downpour . . . We had to pull our hats down over our faces to keep from being drowned. The walking was hard. When we went up a hill, it was against a regular mountain torrent, half-way to our knees and running

like a mill race. When we went down, the great force of the water swept [us] along, making it hard to keep our footing. (pp. 178-179)

Holt fought in the Bloody Angle at Spotsylvania. His narrative carries the reader along, caught up in the excitement and horror of the battle. The editors note that this account "has to rank high among the most graphic, dramatic, and poignant accounts written by any participant about any battle of the war" (p. xvi). Holt writes,

Many of them [Union troops] were shot dead and sank down on the breastworks without pulling their feet out of the mud. Many others plunged forward when they were shot and fell headlong into the trench among us . . . All the time a drizzling rain was falling. The blood shed by the dead and wounded in the trench mixed with the mud and water. It became more than shoe deep, and soon it was smeared all over our clothes. The powder smoke settled on us while the rain trickled down on our faces from the rims of our caps like buttermilk on the inside of a tumbler. We could hardly tell one another apart. (pp. 256-257)

Holt ended his military experiences in August of 1864, captured by Union troops as Company K participated in A.P. Hill's attempt to retake a section of the Weldon Railroad during the battle of Petersburg. After several months as a prisoner at Camp Lookout, Maryland, he was sent to Savannah in December of 1864 and then home to Mississippi. Within the limitations inherent in memoirs written so long after the events portrayed, this book provides a vivid look at the day-to-day life of the Confederate soldier. It is well worth reading for all who have an interest either in the American Civil War or in the life of soldiers generally. Nearly seventy years after his death, David Holt has contributed an important work to the literature of the Civil War.

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**Citation:** David Eyman. Review of Cockrell, Thomas D.; Ballard, Michael B., eds., *Mississippi Rebel in the Army of Northern Virginia: The Civil War Memoirs of Private David Holt*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. May, 1996.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=424>

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