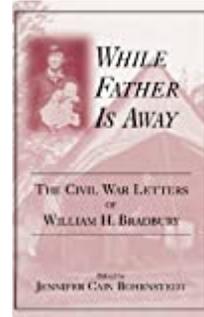




Jennifer Cain Bohrnstedt, ed. *While Father Is Away: The Civil War Letters of William H. Bradbury*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003. x + 386 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2259-5.



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A Long Business Trip

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If a soldier felt little inspiration to fight for cause and comrades, why would he remain in the Union Army for over three years, mustering out long after his regiment had gone home?[1] For the money, or so it seems, according to the unusual letters of William H. Bradbury. Born in 1829 in Lancashire, England, Bradbury emigrated to the United States in 1851 and settled in Illinois where he worked as an attorney, teacher, and land agent for several railroads while speculating in Kansas real estate. Although Bradbury was an educated, ambitious, and experienced man who knew much of the world, his correspondence is odd.

Imagine Civil War letters in which a soldier does not describe a single battle and almost never explains what he thinks of the conflict or the important principle involved in it. Imagine, instead, missives concerned with gossip, financial dealings, prospects for promotion, along with frequent instructions regarding the upbringing and education of his children. It seems difficult to describe this correspondence as “Civil War letters,” although editor Jennifer Cain Bohrnstedt attempts to classify them as

such. John Keegan echoes Clausewitz in his classic, *The Face of Battle*, asserting that fighting, killing, and dying are central to war (fighting is to war, he claims, as cash payment is to trade). Military or war history, then, ought to focus on battles, armies, and the factors that influence them.[2] In the Bradbury correspondence, however, war becomes a backdrop, an inconvenience, a business opportunity, and a source of gossip. Bradbury’s concerns seem almost exclusively civilian. Indeed, he never seems to have made the psychological transition from civilian to soldier that Reid Mitchell discusses in *Civil War Soldiers*. [3] The war presented Bradbury with various small difficulties, but he never seemed to have lost his old civilian identity, autonomy, or self-esteem. After more than a year and a half of military service, he wrote, “I have been accustomed to control my own movements to a great extent and I shall keep a sharp eye to all opportunities for advancement” (p. 137). Although it might seem an artificial distinction, these letters have more to do with general mid-Victorian social history than with the social history of the Civil War.

In large part, the tenor of the letters stems from Brad-

bury's vantage on the conflict. From the very beginning of his enlistment with the 129th Illinois Volunteer Infantry, in the late summer of 1862, Bradbury seemed anxious to avoid soldiering. Although he appears to have sought a commission, he eventually settled for the position of clerk to the adjutant of his regiment. By November 1862, he had become a clerk at brigade headquarters, and from then on, he bounced from one (relatively) cushy position to another. For the rest of the war, he pursued two complementary ends; he sought out the most lucrative clerking positions possible and deflected the requests of his company commander that he return to duty with his regiment. At times, prospects appeared bleak. In December 1862, Bradbury contemplated obtaining a medical discharge (p. 51) and even thought about returning to England (p. 39). Yet Bradbury seemed to possess a keen sense of how to work the system, and by October 1863, as clerk to the Chief Assistant Quartermaster of the 23rd Army Corps, he was earning \$88 per month—almost five times as much as his fellow privates serving in the field (p. 118). Clerking proved so remunerative that Bradbury remained in the army after his regiment mustered out, serving first as a clerk to Judge Advocate Major Gates Thruston (in which capacity he attended the trial of Champ Ferguson) and then to Major General Clinton Fisk, Assistant Commissioner of the Bureau of Freedmen for Tennessee, Kentucky, and Northern Alabama, at a salary of \$150 per month (p. 300). In October 1865, Bradbury, not yet out of the army, angled for the position of reporter to the Tennessee State House of Representatives for \$200 per month (p. 311).

At times, Bradbury augmented his income by dipping into commissary stores (p. 115) and selling correspondence to the *Pontiac Sentinel*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Manchester Guardian* (England). The newspaper correspondence presented something of a quandary for Bradbury, for it paid well, but he risked raising the ire of his superiors by revealing secret information about the army's position and movements. Contemplating this conundrum, he wrote, "I feel afraid that being now secretary to Genl. Butterfield, I may be accused of writing improperly. But when I think of \$5 a letter, I feel to risk it [sic]" (p. 161).

This review may seem overly concerned with Bradbury's income, but his letters display an obsession with money. Indeed, the correspondence brings to mind the Monty Python skit about Ewan McTeagle, the penurious (and fictitious) Scottish poet who wrote verse of the following order: "O gie me a shillin' for some fags / and I'll pay yer back on Thursday, but if you wait till Saturday /

I'm expecting a divvy from the Harpenden Building Society." When Bradbury did not ruminate over his clerking prospects, he incessantly offered advice to his wife about the management of the family property in Illinois, land speculation in Kansas, wrangles over payment for newspaper correspondence, and a wide array of financial deals.

At first glance, it seems ironic that this English-born immigrant played the role of the archetypal Yankee, a grasping and amoral figure in the English—and often-times American—mind. Yet Bradbury's mill-owning family belonged to that great English middle class in Lancashire who appeared grasping and amoral to their countrymen. The mid-Victorian era was a period of ambition and self-improvement for those members of the bourgeoisie who sought fulfillment in this world rather than the consolation of traditional religion.[4] But in Bradbury's case, there was little of that reconciliation of ambition and self-fulfillment on the one hand with duty and service on the other that characterized many of his middle-class peers.

When he did not write of finances, Bradbury proffered extensive advice about his children's upbringing and education. Education, particularly his knowledge of phonography (a form of shorthand), had proven Bradbury's avenue to success, and he sought to enhance his children's future opportunities by ensuring they obtained a thorough grounding in important skills such as composition and spelling. To encourage his children's intellectual and moral development, he devised a detailed system of rewards. Bradbury felt a special affinity for his oldest child, Jane, and took great pains to nurture her intellect. Bradbury did not love all his children so much, and generally preferred his daughters to his sons. He attempted to get his wife to terminate the pregnancy that culminated in the birth of his sixth child, Charles, whose arrival plunged Bradbury into depression (p. 306).

Bradbury also corrected (yes, corrected) his wife's letters (p. 142). The relationship between William and Mary Bradbury is difficult to decipher, in part, due to the nature of William's correspondence, and, in part, because most of Mary's missives have disappeared. Bohrstedt insists the Bradburys' letters reveal "the coals of passion had not cooled over the years" of their marriage (p. 3). Although he often closed his letters affectionately, Bradbury rarely used particularly demonstrative language. Instead, the sections of his letters that did not detail his own doings and surroundings often consisted of advice, caution, and hectoring about family business

dealings and Mary's conduct. Forbidden to accept charity by her proud husband, Mary found herself raising six children while serving as William's agent in a variety of transactions. Clearly, the Civil War proved far more difficult for her than for her husband. Instead of opportunity, Mary experienced greater drudgery, worry, and hardship.

Bohrnstedt put much effort into identifying the various figures who flit across Bradbury's pages and shows herself adept at discussing a variety of social issues in the introductions to each chapter. The afterword, which describes the Bradburys' post-war experience, is particularly interesting. In this section, Bohrnstedt includes two letters to Jane, one penned by William and one by Mary, both written in 1880. Although less polished, Mary's letter is more moving, poignant, and dignified. Without complaining, she ruminates on a life of hardship and difficulty while contemplating the flaws of her restless, ambitious, and thwarted husband. Mary's reflections betray a degree of self-consciousness and thoughtfulness that do not appear in William's letters, and historians can only lament the loss of her correspondence (pp. 321-324).

Not all of the chapters work out so well. Bohrnstedt seems far more comfortable with social history than with other topics, such as military affairs, politics, and business. For instance, her introduction to the fighting around Knoxville in 1863 is confusing and disjointed (pp. 108-111). Her grasp of Anglo-American relations and British opinion during the war also appears unsure (pp. 78-79). Now that historians show much more interest in the Atlantic community, Bohrnstedt could have made more of Bradbury as a living embodiment of that community. Also, it seems Bohrnstedt could have clarified Bradbury's business dealings since these occupied such a prominent place in his correspondence. All in all, the introductions to each chapter not only could have provided more information (e.g., details of Bradbury's specific tasks as a clerk), but also could have responded better to the discussions of contemporary historiography.

At the same time, Bohrnstedt shows a little too much indulgence and affinity for Bradbury. "Shrewd, calculating, manipulative, and scheming are all appropriate words to describe him," she writes, "as are passionate, humorous, philosophical, and paternal" (p. 2). Although she recognizes the above vices (including insensitivity to his wife's needs), she excuses them and tends to emphasize his virtues. She clearly believes his account, in this respect, shows a positive balance. But in 1864, the colonel

of his regiment felt Bradbury's example afforded "a bad precedent of which others might avail themselves and thus fritter away [the] regiment" (p. 142). Everyone contributes as he can, but if the Federal army had consisted exclusively of men on the make like William Bradbury, the Confederacy would have won its independence.

In the final analysis, perhaps the greatest limitation associated with this volume has to do with the letters themselves. Bradbury only rarely analyzed the events or people around him. His missives betray none of the reflection or self-consciousness one sees in his wife's letters. The correspondence of a literate man, well placed to survey a wide variety of events and developments, ought to deliver information of enormous value to the historian. Bradbury apparently witnessed the fight for Knoxville in 1863 and the battles around Atlanta in 1864. He knew Benjamin Harrison, Daniel Butterfield, and a host of other influential, high-ranking officers. He attended the trial of Champ Ferguson as a court reporter, wrote minutes for the first convention of the Freedmen and Refugee Bureau in Nashville, and served an assistant commissioner of that bureau. As a commissary clerk, he understood something of the enormous logistical tasks that confronted the Federal army in the West. Yet Bradbury's letters home reveal little about these personalities and events. Although his business dealings and his attention to his children's upbringing are significant for the purposes of social history, these elements require more context and elaboration on the part of the editor. Overall, it seems a pity that William Bradbury often seemed more concerned with the arrival of the paymaster and the outcome of land speculations than with the great and tragic war that raged around him.

Notes

[1]. For the most recent discussion of why Civil War soldiers fought, see James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[2]. John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), p. 28.

[3]. Reid Mitchell, *Civil War Soldiers: Their Expectations and Their Experiences* (New York: Viking Press, 1988), pp. 56-58.

[4]. Anne C. Rose, *Victorian America and the Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 17-108.

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