



6-3-2014

What Makes a Man?: A Historiography on the Common Soldier and Masculinity

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Kirk, Brianna E., "What Makes a Man?: A Historiography on the Common Soldier and Masculinity" (2014). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 56.
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Abstract

The American Civil War ended with Union victory on April 9, 1865, in the front parlor of the McLean House in Appomattox, Virginia. Robert E. Lee's surrender to Ulysses S. Grant ensured the southern states would return to the Union and begin the process of Reconstruction. Union soldiers, flushed with victory, reveled in the knowledge that their cause triumphed, that their masculinity and honor was upheld while the southern men were forced to reconcile with their failure as soldiers and men. This victorious sentiment and love toward the Union Army has transcended the celebratory jubilees in which northern soldiers engaged in the years after the war, emerging through the words of historians into the late twentieth century. For generations, historians focused on the broader wartime actions and achievements of generals and politicians compared to the soldiers who did the actual fighting. This changed, however, in the mid-twentieth century. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, Masculinity

Disciplines

History | Military History | United States History

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This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

What Makes a Man?: A Historiography on the Common Soldier and Masculinity

June 3, 2014

By: Brianna Kirk, '15

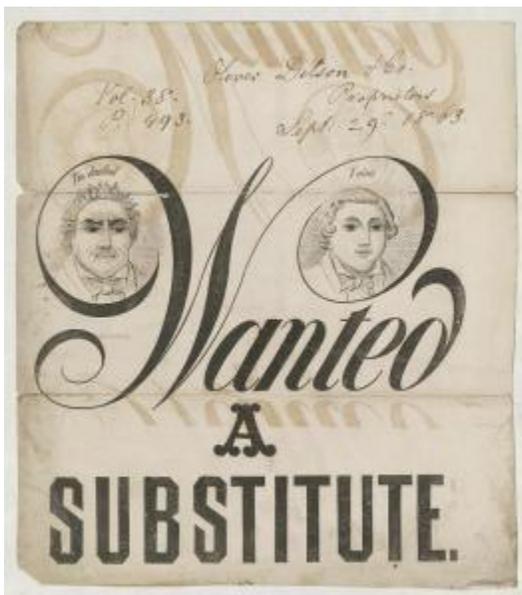
The American Civil War ended with Union victory on April 9, 1865, in the front parlor of the McLean House in Appomattox, Virginia. Robert E. Lee's surrender to Ulysses S. Grant ensured the southern states would return to the Union and begin the process of Reconstruction. Union soldiers, flushed with victory, reveled in the knowledge that their cause triumphed, that their masculinity and honor was upheld while the southern men were forced to reconcile with their failure as soldiers and men. This victorious sentiment and love toward the Union Army has transcended the celebratory jubilees in which northern soldiers engaged in the years after the war, emerging through the words of historians into the late twentieth century. For generations, historians focused on the broader wartime actions and achievements of generals and politicians compared to the soldiers who did the actual fighting. This changed, however, in the mid-twentieth century.

In 1952, Bell Irvin Wiley took the first step towards examining the daily life of soldiers and their reasons for fighting in *The Life of Billy Yank*. Wiley's analysis of the common Union soldier reinforced the idea that he was a man to be revered; his narrative celebrated the masculinity of the average enlisted man and feted his devotion to the country. Wiley's depiction of honorable and courageous enlisted men held strong for decades. Few historians, the lone exception being Gerald Linderman through his book *Embattled Courage*, leveled any serious challenges to Wiley's sterilized narrative. Subsequent historians like James McPherson adopted this approach, contending that the men who fought did so to prove their personal honor and masculinity, both to themselves and society. These scholars preferred to recount tales of common soldiers who, with clenched jaw and burnished bayonet, charged the rebel enemy with ideological conviction.

Until recently, common soldier literature has focused solely on the men who volunteered to fight in the army, entirely disregarding other categories of men who risked their lives for the Union cause: conscripts, immigrants, draftees, and substitutes. McPherson bluntly stated

in *For Cause and Comrades*, a study largely focusing on why Civil War soldiers chose to enter the war, that he was “less interested” in the “skulkers who did their best to avoid combat.” By rejecting these men from the studies of Union soldiers, historians have painted a unified and cohesive picture of the northern army, asserting that all men who fought drew from a deep well of patriotism and duty.

Lorien Foote, in her seminal work *The Gentlemen and The Roughs: Violence, Honor, and Manhood in the Union Army*, argues against McPherson, claiming that to Union soldiers, honor was a “contested term of manhood,” one that combated this unifying force amongst soldiers previously promoted by historians. Foote defines honor as the “public reputation and respect of others” in regards to a man’s “self-worth.” While men fought in the army to prove their masculinity and honor, each economic class of men gave way to different definitions and expectations of what characteristics an honorable, “manly” soldier exhibited. The warring nature of upper and lower class men fueled the divided opinions over what masculinity meant and looked like. A contentious debate erupted in duels and regimental courts-martial. Masculinity and honor, therefore, were not unifying forces that helped soldiers develop camaraderie, but rather were detrimental to the supposed harmony in the Union Army.



Foote’s unorthodox dissent from the typical view of common soldier analysis points to the larger notion that historians have generally overlooked the importance of gender studies when it comes to studying Billy Yank and Johnny Reb. Aaron Sheehan-Dean argues that though much work exists on masculinity, the traditional narratives need to be “recast,” with heavier emphasis on different and new perspectives that would cause scholars to “rethink the larger narrative of American history.” Historian Joan Scott argues in her seminal article that gender reveals a great deal about how power relations work in various historical eras. She writes that gender is a “primary way of signifying

relationships of power.” By analyzing power relations in the context of gender studies, specifically masculinity and honor, Sheehan-Dean hopes gender studies will bring about a more rounded view of common soldier history.

Ultimately, gender does expose power relations in society, which is amplified during military service. Studies focusing on substitutes and the primary reason they fought (someone else bought their way out of service) does not mesh nicely with the societal perception that all northern men were distinguished gentlemen, or paramount examples of

manhood. Scholarship focused on substitutes is often uncomfortable to historians because it disrupts the uniform mold of the Union Army that has existed for decades. More importantly, it taints perceptions of northern men by showing that high-profile people could literally buy their way out of fighting. Arguments like that of Lorien Foote work to break the conventional approach to common soldier studies by exposing the fractious nature of the Union Army, therefore proving that gender can be a powerful analytic tool to Civil War studies and can add in meaningful ways to our understanding of the war's lived realities, on and off the battlefield.

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