Civil War Letters of Daniel Wooton: The Metamorphosis of a Quaker Soldier

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When the American Civil War erupted in the spring of 1861, members of the small religious sect known as the Society of Friends (or Quakers) struggled to preserve their traditional antiwar beliefs in the highly charged environment while, simultaneously, sustaining loyalty to President Abraham Lincoln's administration. Quaker doctrine stressed nonviolent means to settle disputes. Although theoretically opposition to armed hostility could be implemented within the embrace of the Society, Friends knew from past history that in a real crisis such convictions were often clouded by governmental needs and demands. Within that context some Friends, albeit repeatedly admonished by their yearly meetings to avoid warlike overtures, abandoned, at least temporarily, the cornerstone of two-hundred-year-old pacifist dogma and enrolled for military duty.¹ Daniel Wooton was one such Friend.

Born circa 1838, Wooton was reared in a Quaker environment in Wayne County, Indiana, the home of the largest number of Quaker monthly meetings in the state. He belonged to New Garden Monthly Meeting near Newport, now Fountain City, in east central Indiana. He volunteered for military duty in August, 1861, in Company C, Forty-first Indiana Regiment, Second Cavalry and rose to the rank of second lieutenant. Briefly, Wooton's major military engagements with the Forty-first Regiment, Indiana's first complete cavalry unit, included the battle of Pittsburg Landing (Shiloh), the siege of Corinth, and the occupation of Atlanta. As commissary of the second Brigade of Cavalry, Wooton then joined General James H. Wilson for raids throughout Alabama and Georgia. The Quaker soldier reenlisted in December, 1863, and re-

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mained in the army until the final surrender. He was mustered out July 22, 1865.2

Just prior to his initial enrollment and throughout the first two-and-one-half years of war, Wooton wrote a series of fascinating letters to a school friend, Miriam Green, with whom he was obviously in love. (Sadly, for Wooton, his affection was unrequited.) Two parallel narratives emerge from this correspondence, which dated from April 26, 1861, to October 30, 1863. First of all, as was characteristic of men in uniform who experienced combat for the first time, Wooton recounted the everyday events of the war. He chronicled camp life, battles, and duties and conscientiously noted his whereabouts. More significantly, however, Wooton's letters reveal considerable introspection as he strove to resolve the Quaker antiwar tenet with his own involvement in the hostilities. His personal two-year struggle, painstakingly recorded throughout his writings, discloses more of the inner conflict confronted by Quakers during the Civil War than letters written by most other Friends in uniform. The emerging portrait shows Wooton as a young man battling, on the one hand, with his Quaker background relating to war and, on the other, with what he saw as the need to defend the honor of the Union. Initially doubtful of his destiny, he matured over the course of two years from an unsettled, naive soldier to a proud fighting man.

In his first letter to Mell, written from Richmond, Indiana, soon after the fall of Fort Sumter, Wooton contemplated enlistment:

Friend Mell [Miriam],
I have not volunteered yet but dont know how soon I may. Excitement not so high as it was: if I join any company it will be a company of cavelry they are getting up in this place. (that is a company of horsemen).3

Although Mell's responses to Wooton are unavailable, she was apparently eager to advise him on the subject of military duty. He answered that he would listen with "as much interest as you can feel in giving it."4 Wooton worried, however, that his mother would

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3 Daniel P. Wooton to Miriam W. Green, April 26, 1861, Miriam W. Green Papers (Indiana Historical Society Library, Indianapolis). The author of this article has made every effort to transcribe as precisely as possible the portions of Wooton's letters that are quoted below. Wooton frequently did not begin sentences with capital letters nor conclude them with periods; the transcriber has done the same, double-spacing where necessary to facilitate reading. The author of the article has not corrected Wooton's spelling, punctuation, or grammar nor placed (sic) after every error. Arbitrary choices were sometimes unavoidable when deciding between commas, periods, or colons and between upper and lower case letters. If Wooton's intent could not be determined, the rules of modern grammar were followed. Obviously unintentional repetitions and words that Wooton crossed out in his letters were omitted.
4 Wooton to Green, May 1, 1861, Green Papers.
resist his desire to volunteer "though I can-not think that she will oppose my course as much as some others." Writing assertively, he explained why it would not be wrong to join the armed forces:

She [Wooton's mother] knows what National Justice is and She is willing for the nation to get this justice the quickest way. in my estimation the cheapest way will be to hang every man that is in forcession that is my Quaker exactly, and I believe that just God will also justify us in doing so. Mell this is bold talk, but nevertheless true in my opinion. I am a fraid you will think hard of me writing this way but hope you will forgive.6

Nearly two months later Wooton, though still a civilian, casually noted one of the prime motivators for military enlistment during the Civil War—economics. Unemployment, intermittent joblessness, low wages on the farm and in the factory, use of bounties in recruitment, and the assurance of an income prompted many men to don uniforms. Wooton was no exception:

Dear Mell I had not thought verrey seriously about enlisting yet but if I do thee shall see me before I go. (the Lord being willing) but I dont think I shall go yet a while at least: ... as long as I have work to do I shall not go but if I run out of work and they want more men I think Dan shall go for one if they will have him which I doubt not[.]

In the same letter, however, Wooton's writing became dramatic, if not histrionic in tone, as he militantly espoused his war sentiments:

We all know the Bible says thou shalt not kill: but what are we to do with those persons that rebell against the law of our country are we to just lay down and let them have the rains of this republican government. No! never! so long as God gives us the power to quell them by any means. Did God set down and let the Devil take the uppermost seat in heaven when he caused the rebellion there? no Sir! he cast him out of Heaven and sent him to an endless torment. and that is the way he intends for us to do, (is my believe) he intends for us to extinguish them in the quickest way we can. Now Dear Mell thee knows just my war sentiments in full.8

Soon after this vehement refrain and religious analogy, Wooton joined the army, though not without reservations. Initially, he fretted that Mell would think of him as one of the forsaken, but writing from Camp Morton in Indianapolis in October, 1861, he expressed relief when "I recieved your kind letter I found I was mistaken and I feel glad that I was mistaken."9 In a bittersweet mood, however, he continued:

I enjoy my self verrey well. have nothing to regret as yet. only that I can not get to see my friends as often as I would like. hope I will see them before long though.

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5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., July 11, 1861.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., October 2, 1861.
Mell it is going to be very hard for me to refrain from all the vices of camp life though hop[e] I shall so far as I can. I dont know that I have changed much from what I was when you saw me last[.]

Wooton's morale plummeted in December, 1861, while he was bivouacked at Camp Bridgeland in Kentucky. Camp immorality, loneliness, and boredom, coupled later with a case of the measles, caused the young Quaker to reflect on the wisdom of his decision to become a soldier. Although Wooton assured Mell that he had not changed much since his civilian days, he was clearly worried about what effect the army might have on his moral character.

Friend Mell I feel lonely out here with none of my friends to even cheer me with a kind word. no not hardly a letter to show me that they have not forgotten me neither forgotten those pleasant times which we have spent in old Newport. . . . you will find me the same Dan as when I left you on that fine Saturday evening before I enlisted. Mell I dont know that I have changed much from what I was when last I saw you. only that I am not as steady as I was when I left old Newport. but this is a hard place for one to keep a good moral character.

He continued to write in the same vein a few weeks later:

I might have been proclaiming the glad tidings of free garlace to those ribbles [rebels] instead of being on my journey to their own fair lands to destroy their property, as well as take their blood for vengeance sake. This mite have been the standing of your Soldier boy had he have minded the workings of God in his heart as his mother has oftimes entreated him to do and when it was not too late[.]

Apparently lamenting the fact that he had spurned God's teachings in regard to war, Wooton implied that he had made the wrong decision to fight for the Union. As he poignantly stated, however, there was no turning back. By the middle of February, 1862, failure to receive letters from home had plunged his morale to its lowest point. Rumors had spread that his regiment was ordered to Oregon, and Dan seemed somewhat apprehensive about confronting western Indians and possibly losing his scalp. In particular, Wooton feared that if he were slain his body either would not or could not be sent home for proper burial. "But if a person should get his scalp taken down there there would not be much chance for a person to be brought home. But that would not amount to much any how." Three months later Wooton was camped near Corinth, Mississippi, and for the first time in his letters to his school friend described life on the battlefield. Concerned less now about justifying his role as a soldier, Wooton focused on the grisly consequences of

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90 Ibid.
91 Ibid., December 10, 1861. Even two years later Wooton wrote similarly: "I am . . . isolated from all that is lovely; and placed in a position that knows naught but barbarity and the most gross sort of pleasures . . . [.]" Ibid., October 30, 1863.
92 Ibid., December 29, 1861.
93 Ibid., February 14, 1862.
war. Only once earlier had he briefly referred to combat when he explained the word “ambulance” to Mell: it was a “large spring wagon for the purpose of halling the dead and wounded of the battle field.” Now an experienced fighting man, Wooton accepted death and destruction as commonplace:

our pickets are with in one mile of that place [Corinth] and while I sit here writing to you the unceasing roar of artillery fills the ear with its heavy sound which is rather calculated to fill the mind with dread than to enliven his spirit to mirth and jolity. But it has become so common a thing with us that we scarcely give time enough to think, of what is the result of such work.

Then in reference to tanning easily from the sun, Wooton admitted that he was content with a soldier’s lot:

But if that [tanning] would be all in the final out-come I would be verry well satisfied for my share of the soldiering. But as I know not what will be my lot before the final issue of the present campaign I will awate my fate with my heart as merry as the sporting lamb. But it occurs to me that I hear Mell say: Why Dan how can thee be merry when at every hour you see the dead remains of some poor soldier gliding slowly by to be layed down in its narrow bed to remain there till final judgement day. I will answer that by saying that this is not home where Mother Father Brother & Sisters all come to offer their sorrows over the parting remains of a dear son who has been to them a world of pleasure for many years gone by.

On a lighter note Wooton related his cooking arrangements. With a steady diet of “hard bread beens potatoes rice coffee molasses bacon and corn-beef and fresh beef,” the men were ordered to keep one day’s provisions cooked ahead in case the company was called out. Whimsically, he wrote: “My kitchen is the broad blue sky for a roof and the tall hills on either side for the walls on which to hang my cooking utensils. rather a romantic kitchen think it aint.”

For eight months beginning in June, 1862, Wooton served as clerk in hospitals near Corinth and Nashville. While in Tennessee Dan learned that one of his brothers might be drafted, and he responded to the distressing news. Having been in the army for over one year and having experienced firsthand the horrors of combat, Dan, playing the role of protective kinsman, wanted no siblings to risk their lives. At the same time, however, he saw the necessity of replenishing the ranks in order to end the war. He scrawled:

Brother Bige was expecting to be Drafted the last letter I got from him oh! I do hope he will not have to go to war for I think that Dan is enough for our family.

14 Ibid., January 19, 1862.
15 Ibid., May 22, 1862. More than a year later Wooton echoed similar sentiments: During the battle of Chickamauga “our Brigade was under fire nearly all one day: I was in with the rest of the boys but fighting has become so common a thing that soldiers never think of writing to their friends every time they get in a little mix.” Ibid., October 30, 1863.
16 Ibid., May 22, 1862.
17 Ibid.
not think our family is any better than any boddy elses: But—i dont want any more of them to be shot at thats all. for I fully aware that the sound of rifle balls is not as desirable music as some I have heard. But if it is necessary let them come too and all others that wish a free country.\footnote{Ibid., September 23, 1862.}

Two months later Wooton, relieved to hear that Bige had escaped the draft, reiterated his fears when he discovered that his brother James had enlisted:

I received a letter from Brother Bige yesterday stating that he had escaped the Draft so far Oh! I was so glad of that for I did not want any of my brothers to see such times as I have already seen But such is life. I much regretted to hear of Brother James enlisting for I know he cannot stand a soldiers labor. Oh! that all men could see the error of fighting before it is too late. not that I regret that I enlisted now I have enlisted but that I did not want any of my Brothers to pass through what I have already done. But if they try it them selves they will know the better how to sympathize with those that have already gone think they wont Mell.\footnote{Ibid., November 17, 1862.}

Wooton's appointment as hospital clerk was relatively uneventful. Except for a three-hour battle at Stevenson, Alabama, his stay in Nashville was pleasant "for there are plenty of Yankey ladies at our Hosp:t to make the days pass off lively. every thing appear gay and happy.\footnote{Ibid.} The young Quaker's psychological well-being had improved greatly and upon returning to active duty by March, 1863, a renewed feeling of patriotism pervaded his letters as he scribbled that he had "returned to the field of strife to gain a great victory or fall in the arms of grim Death for the sake of his country."\footnote{Ibid., March 14, 1863.}

As the war dragged on in the spring and early summer of 1863, Confederate victories, especially the Union disaster at Chancellorsville, confirmed that hostilities would not soon end. With the fate of the war seemingly in limbo, Wooton pondered openly his relationship with Mell. He dolefully suspected that it would be another year before he could return home, "but I sincerely hope not: But if it is my fortune I shall resign Cheerfully to my fate . . . .\footnote{Ibid., June 3, 1863.}" Wooton desperately wanted Mell to write more letters and convey her feelings toward him. He wrote that he loved her and anxiously needed reassurance that someone cared back home and eagerly awaited his return. Had Mell "appreciated the worth of letters as we do in the army: away from friends home and all that is dear to us (excepting the cause of our glorious country) . . . .\footnote{Ibid.}" Wooton penned, she would probably write more often. He continued: "Now love is appreciated as highly in the army by me as in civil life: And if I should not live to return home to you I would have the assurance in my last hours that there was one at least at home who was
By the late summer of 1863, in the wake of significant Union victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, Wooton had crossed his Rubicon. He was absolutely convinced that serving his country in the war was the right course of action for him. He bore no regrets. Wooton confidently wrote of his remaining time in service:

why should I not feel satisfied to serve the remaining eleven months since I have stood the hard-ships thus far. And besides: would I be the man upon whose courage my friends at home could rely for safety. Mell I never was much for pride but I am too proud of the victories achieved by the army of the Cumberland to even give one thought to leaving hir at this late day.

In addition, Dan summed up what may have been the crux of his motivation and justification for fighting. He nostalgically remembered a special evening with Mell very early in the war while he was still a civilian. The memory prompted him to put his thoughts on paper. Pensively, he wrote:

Well do I remember that beautiful evening of which you have spoken and I will assure you Mell there was more than one thought revolving in my mind upon that sublime evening. There was my duty to my country, to my God and my friends at home, and the object was which should I serve first. So I came to the conclusion by serving my country I would be serving my God and friends also, there fore I resolved to enlist and risk my chances with that of my fellow soldiers: And to day I feel proud that I have enlisted and I hope I shall never see the day I shall have to regret it.

Those few sentences, the most revealing lines Wooton or perhaps any other Indiana Quaker soldier penned on the justification of war, climaxed his transformation. Wooton no longer doubted his martial commitment. His reformation, however, had not come quickly or easily. Two-and-one-half years of war—the highs and lows of victory and defeat coupled with loneliness, boredom, homesickness, death, destruction, and hunger—slowed the reconciliation of his Quaker background with his participation on the battlefield. Wooton’s determination to continue as a soldier, his conscientious conflict behind him, hinged on his faith that he would serve God by supporting his country. Coincidentally, and with the aid of hindsight, Wooton’s convictions were resolved soon after the Union victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, usually considered the turning point of the war. As further evidence of Wooton’s belief in the righteousness of war, he reenlisted for three more years in De-

23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., August 31, 1863.
25 Ibid.
ember, 1863, before his initial term had expired. At last, Wooton seemed to have found his inner peace.26

**Epilogue**

With little more than one year remaining in the war, Wooton’s letters abruptly stopped. Apparently Moll broke off the one-sided romance soon after the soldier’s October correspondence. Ten months later Moll received a letter from “Cousin Emma” in which Emma mentioned that Moll gave “Dan his walking papers.” Emma felt that Moll was “too good for him [Dan].”27

The details of Wooton’s life after the Civil War are sketchy. Soon after his discharge from service in July, 1865, Wooton married Lydia J. Stratton in Wayne County, Indiana. They had at least one child, a son, and moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico. While there, Wooton developed a double hernia and applied for and received a pension under the federal pension law enacted in 1890. Soon after his pension application was approved, Wooton, aged fifty-three, was murdered by a gunshot wound at San Lorenzo Springs, New Mexico. Although a grand jury was unable to determine the perpetrator of the crime, a local newspaper claimed that a Mexican, who accused Wooton of taking 160 acres of government land from the rightful owner, was the assassin. Wooton was buried in Albuquerque on October 16, 1891. His wife survived him and lived until her death on October 6, 1923. She died in Los Angeles, California.28

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26 Only two additional letters, neither of which serve further to modify Wooton’s rationale for fighting, survive. In September, 1863, he reported from Bridgeport, Alabama, that he was clerk at brigade headquarters “having good times generally hope my friends up North are doing as well as Dan is or enjoying them selves as well[,]” Finally, having moved to Winchester, Tennessee, in October, 1863, Wooton talked of his eight remaining months in the army: “I am about ready “to retire from the life of a soldier and once more resume that of a citizen. How strange such a life will seem to me for a while at least[,]” Ibid., September 29, October 30, 1863. As noted, Wooton did not retire from military duty and served until peace was achieved.

27 Cousin Emma to Miriam W. Green, August 7, 1864, Green Papers.

28 Marriage License, October 16, 1865, unidentified photocopy, National Archives, Washington, D. C.; General Affidavit, Territory of New Mexico, February 17, October 13, 16, 1891, ibid.; Drop Report–Pensioner, October 13, 1923, ibid.