

## REVIEWS

### *Blood Shed in This War*

*Civil War Illustrations by Captain Adolph Metzner, 32nd Indiana*

By Michael A. Peake

(Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2010. Pp. [ix], 142. Illustrations, bibliography, index. \$34.95.)

Civil War histories tend to fall into two categories. The first is the epic history, often running to several volumes or one fat book. These concern great battles or great leaders – generals and politicians alike – who determined the war's outcome. The second is the microhistory, proudly small, focusing on some tiny matter, often obscure regiments or persons, of interest only to antiquarians or buffs. But what if this second type of history *were* the big picture? I do not doubt that histories of Lincoln and Lee give us the masterplan, but what if local history told us something revelatory that no 738-page book on a Great Man likely ever could?

Michael A. Peake's *Blood Shed in This War* is a local history. Focusing on the pen, ink, watercolor, and pencil drawings of Adolph Metzner, a captain in a German regiment of Indiana soldiers who served between August 1861 and September 1864,

Peake portrays a small corner of the war, using Metzner's modest depictions of camp and battle life among the 32nd Indiana as a record. Peake makes no attempt to present these pictures as conveying anything other than minute interest. In two brief essays preceding a full-color selection of Metzner's pictures, he limits himself to providing a short biography of the artist and a chronological history of the regiment.

What stand out, however, are the cryptic and fascinating details to be found in Metzner's art (and occasionally in Peake's account). Chicken thieves are forced to parade through camp wearing barrels and, apparently, feathers on their heads. Leeches suck the back, buttocks, and legs of a naked soldier fleeing from the Chattahoochee River. A black woman in labor holds her hand to her head while an elderly white midwife smoking a pipe looks intently at her

and Union soldiers loll and laugh around a Mississippi shack. General August Willich, the brave commander of the 32nd Indiana, appears outside his tent with his pet raccoon on his shoulder. In Peake's account, Willich digs a hole and puts his ear into the dirt to determine if a distant rumble is cannon fire or thunder.

What makes these anecdotes of more than local interest? Each is idiosyncratic enough to make us feel in the presence of some long-forgotten episode or custom transcending the neat rhetorical conventions by which we have come to know the war. Each suggests that the entire war was a micro-tissue of such individual incidents and chance impressions. Most went unrecorded, or were modified in the recording until they resembled little more than the customary spit-and-polish of military history, with its predetermined narrative conventions for describing everything from mustering to foraging to fighting to fleeing. But Metzner had enough matter-of-fact plainness in his modest artistic ambition to show things—think of that raccoon on Willich's shoulder—that have no place in our generic story of the war. His work caught the spirit of the war's grand incidentalism. Who is to say that a gesture as small and trivial as a sol-

dier clipping his nails or brushing a bough from his eyes did not contain whole worlds in its deftness and detail? I wish that more histories imagined or found such moments and dwelled on them with similar descriptive care.

Metzner's pictures make no sea-to-shining-sea pretense of universal significance. No cloud banks and scuttling suns attend his humdrum episodes of camp life, but it is just this lack of universal pretense that gives them their unintentional grandness. Peake says next to nothing about the pictures or how the artist came by his training. Aside from a tantalizing reference to Metzner's way of making his pigments in the field—he was a pharmacist before the war and perhaps made his colors from berries and bark when his artistic supplies ran out—Peake's book does not say much about the art. But that is okay. Metzner and Peake give us a glimpse of something as it once was and make available a few arresting details of worlds we would never have known.

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