

for citizenship and freedom for those of their race who had been enslaved for generations.

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The Yankee Plague: Escaped Union Prisoners and the Collapse of the Confederacy

By Lorien Foote

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016. Pp. xiii, 232. Illustrations, maps, notes on sources, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95.)

In our polarized society, even historians are playing along. Two distinct camps appear to contain most military historians of the Civil War: traditional militarists and the nontraditional militarists. Lorien Foote, who stands firmly in the latter camp, shows the merits of viewing society's impact upon the military rather than taking the more traditional top-down approach. In *The Yankee Plague*, Foote makes a compelling argument that during the latter months of the Civil War, waves of escaping Union prisoners of war hastened the collapse of the Confederacy.

The historian will immediately find an inevitability in Foote's story of the Confederacy's final months. Saddled with tens of thousands of prisoners while being continually squeezed into a more compact region, the Southern government was only barely functioning. With young boys and old men guarding sage Union prisoners in often unfenced camps, escapes seemed

a daily occurrence. The Union men who walked away on assumed paroles stumbled toward Union lines, either with General William Sherman in Georgia or in the direction of occupied Knoxville. Confederate authorities often responded by sending men out in search of the escapees, but these small groups gave up easily and their task became the de facto responsibility of loyal Confederates along the route. With such profound limitations, the principals in Foote's story seem to sense the Confederacy's end looming ahead.

Slaves, women, Southern Unionists, and even dogs take on the central roles in Foote's story of national and institutional failure. She relays how slaves sacrificed their meager rations for Unionists who sought them out for refuge and how they even committed crimes and jeopardized their own positions to help these strangers. At the same time, these slaves seemed to

know that things were changing around them and adjusted their own lives to what was rapidly appearing to be a new reality. Real-life heroines not only fed the fugitives, but frequently risked their lives by serving as pilots guiding them along their route. Unionists of all stripes lent a hand when these former prisoners appeared in the community. Perhaps the most concerning participants in this drama were the dogs that did the lion's share of searching for the escaped prisoners.

There is much to like about this book and very little worthy of complaint. Foote's work speaks to a new direction in the bottom-up approach to Civil War military history. It empowers groups that, up to this point, have either been ignored or seen their roles easily questioned. By highlighting the work of these participants, she is able to show the serious disfunction that drove the Confederacy to the point of unalterable collapse, as well as the powerless nature of those men whose job it was to keep it functioning.

If there is a weakness to *The Yankee Plague*, it can be found in the few points where readers would

like to see better secondary research. In passages on Confederate Colonel and Cherokee Chief William Holland Thomas, Foote relies on Vernon Crow rather than Stanly Godbold and Mattie Russell's superior biography. There is talk about George Kirk of North Carolina, but no reference to Phillip Shaw Paludan's *Victims* (1981). But with those shortcomings noted, her primary source research is excellent and her interpretive skill remarkable.

Most authors and presses would like you to believe everything they write on the dustjacket, but few books actually live up to that billing. Lorien Foote's *The Yankee Plague* is the rare title that delivers new information and challenges readers to reconsider what they are confident they already know.

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Village Atheists: How America's Unbelievers Made Their Way in a Godly Nation

By Leigh Eric Schmidt

(Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016. Pp. xix, 337. Illustrations, notes, index. \$35.00.)

The notion of the United States as a "godly nation" does not designate an uncontested fact, but comes from the majoritarian culture of Protestant