Book Reviews


Jennie Starks McKee views the battles of the Civil War as “the last fragments of any romanticism in mass conflict and to an extent the last of any real glorification of war” (p. 1). To her this romance and glory may be seen in the acts and words of its great humanitarian leaders, Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee; but similar qualities may also be found in thousands of common soldiers whose struggle was not in vain. These obscure heroes display inspiration, discipline, dignity, and assurance in the words they left behind. Such a man was Leander Starks, both the inspiration for and the subject of this volume.

Starks, an Indiana private in the Hoosier brigade commanded by John T. Wilder, spent nearly three years in the army. The bulk of the book consists of 110 letters he wrote to his young wife in Decatur County, Indiana, and fifty-eight she sent to him. He saw little military action so there are few striking or macabre accounts of warfare. Indeed, he tends to dismiss what action he did see with a brief statement or two. But be not misled; the Starks letters are rich indeed. They are full of anecdotes about the common soldier and glimpses of camp life. The reader is not apt to forget Starks’ description of trying to sleep on a wooden rail in the mud, battling a large army of bedbugs with an ax, or viewing the remains of a year old battlefield.

The Indiana private frequently mixes humor and vivid detail, as he does in his account of his first sight of the beautiful women of East Tennesse. “Oh ye Gods what a beauty, a girl apparently 16 years of age standing as straight and graceful as a lamp post with her beautiful brown hair hanging down over a face exquisitely daubed with dirt and grease and teeth wonderfully stained with tobacco and the corners of her mouth looked as though they were used for waste gats to let the tobacco juice escape” (pp. 121-22). Starks also reveals much about himself. He becomes thoroughly bored by routine camp life, especially the frequent inspections. He longs for combat. He is bitter about those men who remained at home instead of joining the fight. He often complains about the hardships of being in the army but at
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one point admits that he really loves the wild, dashing life of a soldier.

Unfortunately, Part I of this volume is not as outstanding as the Starks letters. The first section, written by McKee, consists of brief accounts of such varied topics as the Wilder Battery, the Lightning Brigade, and the cavalry of 1861. The research is spotty with too much reliance on Francis T. Miller's Photographic History of the Civil War and no reference to War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. The treatment is so sketchy that few will find much value in this section; yet, if the reader will skim through Part I quickly, Part II, the Starks letters, will bring ample reward.

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When George Ade died in 1944, he and his huge literary production could soon have been forgotten because much of his work, such as his fables, could be considered dated. But despite his breezy and often slangy portrayal of a different era, interest in Ade has continued in several forms. The present book is an example of that interest, and in making available for the first time a good selection of his letters it fills a gap in Adeana.

Ade was a voluminous letter writer, sometimes writing or dictating thirty letters a week, but through modesty or a desire for privacy he kept few carbons of these letters; thus, the editor had to collect them from many sources. From the thousands of extant Ade letters 182 are printed here along with ample footnotes giving sufficient background material, sometimes even including an excerpt from another Ade letter. As the editor says, “the primary concern has been to include letters of biographical, literary, and historical interest” (p. 12).

The book contains a foreword by Paul Fatout and a short autobiography of Ade. An introduction, although it does not contain a full biography of Ade, describes the man and his work effectively from his early days of journalistic writing during the Chicago Renaissance through his period