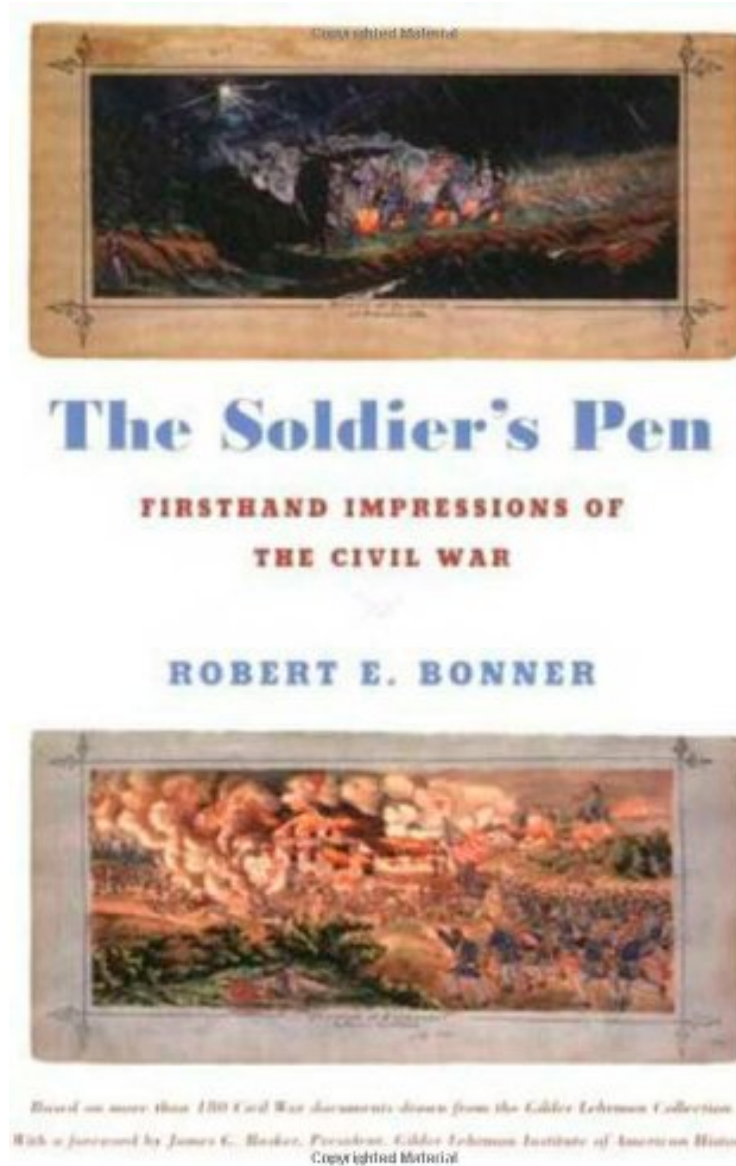


(Read now) The Soldier's Pen: Firsthand Impressions of the Civil War

## The Soldier's Pen: Firsthand Impressions of the Civil War

Robert E. Bonner

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#1390106 in Books 2007-10-30 2007-10-30Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 8.50 x .3 x 5.50l, .75 #File Name: 080908743X272 pages | File size: 68.Mb

**Robert E. Bonner : The Soldier's Pen: Firsthand Impressions of the Civil War** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Soldier's Pen: Firsthand Impressions of the Civil War:

8 of 8 people found the following review helpful. Reading Other People's MailBy Jim SchmidtIn The Soldier's Pen,

Robert E. Bonner - an assistant professor of history at Michigan State University and the author of two previous books on the Civil War - provides Civil War enthusiasts and scholars with extended excerpts from the letters, diaries, and artwork from sixteen Union and Confederate soldiers. The book is an admirable accomplishment in terms of accessibility, relevance, interpretation, and in fulfilling the author's own stated mission. In his Introduction, Bonner admits that though "historians are loath to admit it, there is an illicit thrill that comes with reading other people's mail." (p. 8). He attributes this "thrill" to the sense of discovery that comes from reading and studying documents that were created by soldiers in private moments and intended for a private audience. Bonner has done readers a tremendous favor by providing access to previously unpublished material held in the famous Gilder Lehrman Collection (and now on deposit at the New York Historical Society), and allowing others the same sense of discovery. In terms of relevance, Bonner's selections dispel any modern conceit one might have that Civil War soldiers weren't as funny, clever, cynical, disgusted, romantic, prurient, etc., as the modern soldier. Whether commenting on "War Republicans," "Peace Democrats," presidential elections, race relations, incompetent officers, desertion, marriage, suffering of civilians, etc., the reader will have a sense that we have been there before. In terms of interpretation, Bonner expertly and sensitively weaves the letters, diaries, and artwork into the larger context of the Civil War. In seven chapters, he covers the importance of regular correspondence between soldiers and their families, army life, combat, commitment to (and disaffection with) Union war aims, the fading prospects of the Confederacy, African-American soldiers, and - coming full circle - the importance of surviving letters as family heirlooms and national treasures. For his part, Bonner states that a central aim of his book was to "restore soldiers' individuality." (p. 4). To be sure, he is not the first scholar to draw on soldier correspondence and diaries to provide insights into the lives of Civil War soldiers and sailors. Still, Bonner makes the salient point that previous studies often turn into a "collective portrait," drawing on snippets from dozens, if not hundreds, of pieces of correspondence to examine how "they" marched, fought, and returned home. By concentrating his study on longer excerpts from fewer soldiers, Bonner is able to avoid the trap and instead maintain the personal in what he deems an impersonal war. The reproduction of more than a dozen drawings from the sketchpad of an anonymous Massachusetts infantryman - known only as "George" - is worth the price of the book. If not as talented, this soldier's drawings of the vagaries of soldier life are every bit as comical and insightful as Bill Mauldin's famous "Willie and Joe" cartoons from World War II. "George's" lampooning of the northern press's enthusiastic (and exaggerated) coverage of the taking of a Confederate outhouse deserves to be a classic. The book does have two major flaws; the most glaring of these is the lack of an index. Want to know what soldiers thought of McClellan? of Lincoln? of food? of homeguards? of African-American soldiers? You'll have to read the book and hunt for it yourself. The other major flaw is the lack of a substantial bibliography apart from detailed catalog records from the Gilder Lehrman Collection. In this matter, it fails as a launching point for further research by an interested reader; others may not be satisfied at Bonner's assertions (as statements of fact) on points for which there may be disagreement among scholars. It is the contents that make this book what it is, though; the letters, diary entries, and artwork from these soldiers deserve a wide audience - especially for those interested in "bottom up" history - and in this, Bonner has succeeded. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Bonner writes clearly and it is easy to follow. By Jonah D. Conner I thought it was well presented, a mix of letters, historical background, maps, drawings, etc. Bonner writes clearly and it is easy to follow. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. The Soldiers Pen. By A. Bryant Betsill This book delivers only a topical overview of the day to day life of a Civil War soldier. As the title suggests, Robert Bonner uses actual letters from the soldier in the field that were sent home and kept. There were slim chances of a letter from home being kept by a soldier in the field, under camp conditions. The author writes a brief introduction about the men he chose to feature in the book. There are thousands of such archived letters and hundreds more have just recently been made available to researchers. This book is more of a "Cliff Notes" introduction into the social side of the Civil War soldier.

They are all infantrymen; none were commissioned officers. One is a German-speaking artist whose sole record is nineteen stunning watercolors that cover a year's enlistment. Another is a free black from Syracuse, New York. Six are from slave states, one of whom was a Unionist. Drawing from the more than 60,000 documents housed in the privately held Gilder Lehrman Collection, Robert E. Bonner has movingly reconstructed the experiences of sixteen Civil War soldiers, using their own accounts to knit together a ground-level view of the entire conflict. The immediacy of diaries and the intimacy of letters to loved ones accompany the humor of an anonymous cartoonist from Massachusetts, the vivid paintings of Private Henry Berckhoff. All reproduced for the first time in *The Soldier's Pen*, the documents and images that Bonner weaves together, providing context and explanation as required, powerfully re-create the day-to-day lives of the soldiers who fought and died for Union and Confederacy. Not since the 2000 publication of Robert Sneden's paintings and papers in *Eye of the Storm* has a collection of original Civil War documents so evocatively captured the war.

From Booklist Bonner is the author of two previous books on the Civil War. This riveting and moving compilation is the product of his access to the rich, privately held Gilder Lehman Collection of documents and illustrations. Bonner

uses the letters, journal entries, and sketches of 16 Civil War infantrymen, all previously unpublished, to convey the experiences of war as recounted by those who witnessed it at its most elemental level. The soldiers were Unionists and Confederates; some were common workers, some were well educated, and some were from the Southern gentry. There are letters to wives and sweethearts that convey a sense of longing and loneliness. Other letters touch on the monotony of camp life, the comradeship of men under arms, and the novelty of entering different regions of the country. Some of the sketches drip with sarcastic exaggeration. As expected, the most disturbing and poignant images are conveyed by those who describe battles and their aftermath. This work will be an excellent addition to Civil War collections. Jay Freeman

Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved “For anyone interested in viewing America's traumatic Civil War from the perspective of ordinary individuals who found themselves in the Union and Confederate armies, Robert E. Bonner's *The Soldier's Pen: Firsthand Impressions of the Civil War* will be a very rewarding experience. This expertly edited collection of letters and drawings mailed to the families and friends of sixteen 'typical' but quite diverse citizen-soldiers conveys a deeply human dimension to America's most dehumanizing war.”

David Brion Davis, winner of the Pulitzer Prize and author of *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* “Walt Whitman once said of the Civil War that ‘The real war will never get in the books.’ But the real war does get into this book, in the form of letters and diaries written by sixteen enlisted men, Union and Confederate, who tell it like it was.”

James McPherson, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Battle Cry of Freedom* “Robert E. Bonner has not only found some of the most riveting, impassioned, humorous, and powerful Civil War letters and journals ever written, he has brilliantly woven them together so that the overall collection reads like a first-rate work of literature. *The Soldier's Pen* is a masterpiece of scholarship and, without question, one of the most extraordinary anthologies of Civil War correspondence I have ever read.”

Andrew Carroll, editor of *The New York Times* bestselling *WAR LETTERS* “Thought-provoking.”

Richard Sauer, *Civil War News* on Robert Bonner's *Colors and Blood* “Bonner's outstanding research and analysis provide hope for those who still feel that first-rate scholarship might inform, contextualize, and transcend contemporary historically charged and emotionally passionate polemics. An outstanding work.”

Choice on Robert Bonner's *Colors and Blood* “This is a fantastic accomplishment.”

Paul Christopher Anderson, *American Nineteenth Century History* on Robert Bonner's *Colors and Blood* About the Author Assistant professor of history at Michigan State University, Robert E. Bonner is the author of two previous books on the Civil War. He lives in Hanover, New Hampshire.