



Who Writes History?

Part One of a two-part series

Robert C. Plumb, December 18, 2020

blueandgrayeducation.org



George McClelland, 1862 | public domain

It was John Adams in a letter to Thomas Jefferson who asked, "Who shall write the history of the American Revolution? Who can write it? Who will ever be able to write it?"

The same could be said about the Civil War. Ulysses S. Grant gave us a general's eye view of the war. Writers and scholars such as Douglas Southall Freeman, Bruce Catton, Shelby Foote, and James McPherson have given us literate and "big picture" narratives of the war that provide a sense of the overall historical forces at work in the country 1861 to 1865. There also have been first-hand narratives written by participating soldiers based on their letters, diaries, and recollections. (Recollections that may have evolved over time.)

In this latter category is the book [Your Brother in Arms: A Union Soldier's Odyssey](#), based on 41 letters written by a soldier in the 155th Pennsylvania Infantry. George P. McClelland wrote these letters during his service from August 1862 to March 1865, when his letter writing was cut short by a grievous wound suffered at the Battle of Five Forks, Virginia, on April 1, 1865. McClelland's letters present a ground-eye view of the war—an infantryman's perspective—and they were written contemporaneously with the events they describe. Time did not burnish or embellish McClelland's perspective of the American Civil War. He wrote as it happened.

McClelland's letters are especially intriguing to followers of the war because of their comprehensiveness—they cover the Army of the Potomac from Antietam in September 1862 through Five Forks in April 1865. There are few gaps in McClelland's coverage of his experiences. And because they are such literate descriptions of camp life, the commanding generals, the battles, and the surrounding 19th-century environment, McClelland's wartime letters paint a vivid picture of the ordinary and extraordinary situations facing a soldier in mid-19th-century America.

Over the course of two Dispatches, today and Monday, December 21, 2020, we will be sharing excerpts from some of these fascinating letters.

McClelland comments on his senior officers:

[George] McClelland's strategy is played out. [John] Pope doesn't appear to do much better. Stonewall Jackson is a match for the whole of them." *August 1862*

"General McClelland and staff passed just now. The boys gave him a hearty cheer. A great many think he is no man for Jackson." *September 20, 1862*

"Joe Hooker is in command now. Well, my opinion is that he is not 'the man.' I may be mistaken; I hope so. One thing, however, he is getting very popular among the men by his new orders, such as granting limited furloughs, ordering the issue of soft bread four times a week, potatoes, onions, etc., showing great interest in the welfare of the Army. What he intends to do with the Army after he has 'remodeled' it, time alone will tell." *February 14, 1863*

"A soldier can see a great difference or change since Meade was placed in command [of the Army of the Potomac]. Short rations—one day we marched 28 miles without bread, meat or coffee." *July 19, 1863*

"'Corduoy Meade' was afraid of a few rifle pits ... The fact of the matter is Meade was afraid of Lee." *July 21, 1863*

McClelland's opinion of President Lincoln varied greatly over time:

"Granny Lincoln has again forgot the dignity of the President of a great republic by opening a correspondence with a newspaper ... Ye fathers and statesmen, who are asleep, arouse ye from your lethargy and show yourselves in the hour of your Country's greatest distress." *August 1862*

"I am glad to know my oldest brother is prospering. Tell him to vote for Lincoln and not the tool of unprincipled anti-Republican-liberty men [George McClelland]. Three-fourths of the Army will vote for Uncle Abe." *September 20, 1864*

When Ulysses S. Grant became General in Chief of the Union Army, McClelland's positive assessment of the commanding general increased significantly:

"Grant's army still remains intact; that the siege has not raised [at Petersburg]; that mortality is not more than the ordinary rate, swamps, malaria, etc., to the contrary notwithstanding." *August 22, 1864*

"That finished soldier, Sherman, has taken Atlanta and Grant has fingers of steel closing around the throat of Rebellion in Virginia ... now the men are arriving 1,000 per day and before a month, we assume again the offensive; 100,000 men now would terminate the war in 60 days—Grant has said it." *September 4, 1864*

"My opinion is that Grant will hazard nothing by an offensive movement unless he has a sure thing because he can afford to wait. Every day we become stronger and the enemy weaker ..." *September 20, 1864*

McClelland's thoughts didn't always focus on critiquing the Union Army's general officers or the President of the United States. He also had more immediate and mundane concerns, such as his diet:

"[M]ade preparations for dinner. Had to kill a couple of hogs and dress them. That is for the Company [Company F]. I, in the Company with three others, went down to a house and bought a couple of chickens, got some potatoes and corn, borrowed a sauce pan, built a fire and had a nice chicken pie. All we wanted was a little flour and butter." *September 25, 1862*

"I received in a box some underclothing, a can of delicious peaches and a box of sardines, together with a pair of boots. I shall ever remember with fondness these dear ones who have been so kind and thoughtful to me." *November 3, 1862*

"My health is improving and the 'hard tack' disappears as fast as ever. It is astonishing the variety of dishes we have. Hard tack plain, crackers 'ala mode,' tack Americanais, cracker scouse; crackers roasted, fried, and boiled. Then we get fat pork and, about once a month, molasses, potatoes, and onions. Who says we are not well fed?" *January 10, 1863*

"We are still living comfortably in our old camp feasting on such delicacies as potatoes, onions, peas, molasses, and soft bread. [General] Hooker understands human nature. He keeps the men well fed, well clothed, and gives them plenty to do." *March 19, 1863*

The eight-day ration is still in force. No commander will ever be popular who does not feed the men right. A full half of the Army is in a starving condition, the hard bread not fit for swill ... I want for nothing but a little good grub." *November 15, 1863*

To be continued on Monday, December 21, 2020 ...

Letter excerpts from Robert Plumb's [Your Brother in Arms: A Union Soldier's Odyssey](#). University of Missouri Press, Shades of Blue and Gray Series.



This Civil War Dispatch has been brought to you by the Blue and Gray Education Society, a non-profit 501-3C educational organization. Please visit us at www.blueandgrayeducation.org.

Share this email:



[Manage](#) your preferences | [Opt out](#) using TrueRemove®

Got this as a forward? [Sign up](#) to receive our future emails.

View this email [online](#).

P.O. Box 1176
Chatham, VA | 24531 US

This email was sent to .
To continue receiving our emails, add us to your address book.

emma

[Subscribe](#) to our email list.