

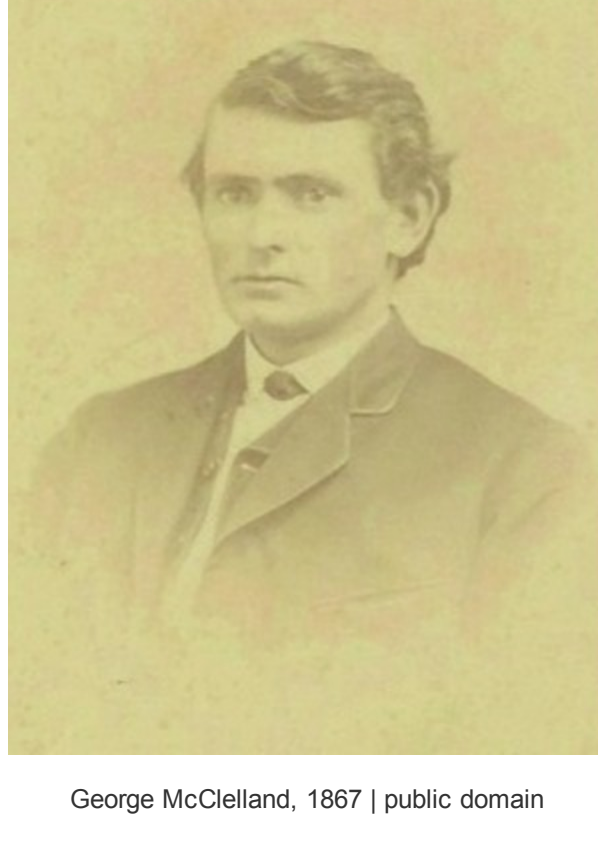


## Who Writes History?

### Part Two of a two-part series

Robert C. Plumb, December 21, 2020

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George McClelland, 1867 | public domain

*This past Friday, we read excerpts from George P. McClelland's letters of the 155th Pennsylvania Infantry. He wrote these letters during his service from August 1862 to March 1865, presenting a ground-eye view of the war—an infantryman's perspective. Time did not burnish or embellish McClelland's perspective of the American Civil War. He wrote as it happened.*

*Today we present more excerpts of his literate descriptions of camp life, the battles, and the war's effect on him, bringing us to his very last one, just weeks before he led his company in an assault on the Confederate line at Five Forks, Virginia. The Confederates fell back and eventually retreated from the field at the close of the day on April 1, 1865. During the battle, McClelland was hit in the upper left thigh by a round fired by one of Gen. Matthew Ransom's North Carolinians. At the conclusion of the battle, as darkness fell, members of his company carried McClelland to the nearby Gravelly Run Church. The tiny church, located in a grove of evergreens, had been hastily turned into a field hospital to treat the severely wounded.*

*McClelland survived his wound and was awarded the rank of Brevet Major for his bravery on the field at Five Forks. After a two-year recovery period in Pittsburgh, he moved to Davenport, Iowa, to work in his brother's construction firm. The soldier quickly transformed to the civilian world and was recognized in Davenport for his civic accomplishments. When he died in Davenport in 1898, his minister remarked in McClelland's eulogy: "Step by step, he won his way by sheer merit and conspicuous gallantry."*

**Regardless if he was satisfied with a full stomach, or hungering for some "good grub," McClelland abstained from alcohol. Perhaps his religious views or the lack of availability of strong drink may have influenced his thinking.**

"You need not be afraid of me falling a victim to evil passions or strong drink. I am not exposed to any temptations like I would be in a city like Pittsburgh. And as for strong drink, it cannot be had for love or money, so say they who lust after it." *September 25, 1862*

**George McClelland had a close view of war from early in his service to the close of his time as a Union soldier. Many times, he shared his experiences in the war with his family. At times he was frank about the devastation and horror he saw; other times he was less forthcoming—perhaps to shield his family from the dangers he faced.**

"This is a horrible place [Antietam Battlefield]. Men, both Union and Rebel. The latter three to one, are lying all around us; unburied horses in dozens everywhere you go creating an intolerable stench. Yesterday I went down to an orchard to get some apples, and before I was aware of it, I was among dozens of dead Rebels lying all through it. But worst of all were the poor fellows lying in sheds and barns unable to move who have no surgical aid, no one to tend to them." *September 20, 1862*

"Our Regiment went in first [Fredericksburg], reached the brow of the hill, but could go no further. We lay down behind it, but had to rise at every fire to do any execution. We were totally powerless. The enemy appeared to have it all their own way. Their shells bursting over our heads, while the lead was flying thick and fast. Our 1st Lieutenant was wounded on one side of me and several of the boys on the other side were crying for their comrades to take them off the field. It was a wonder that I escaped. I stood on my feet and took as deliberate aim as I could. They shot a piece of my gun away, a splinter taking me on the leg doing no damage." *December 20, 1862*

"I need not attempt to describe the battle [Chancellorsville]. Enough has been written on that. I might tell you though how near I came falling into the hands of the enemy. On the night of May 5th, the whole Army had retreated with the exception of the 5th Corps which was left to cover the retreat .... Towards evening, the firing had almost entirely ceased and a heavy rain commenced falling ... We stood until nearly 12 o'clock in line expecting a night attack ... Lieutenant Edward Clapp and myself went on a reconnaissance to hunt a dry spot to lie upon ... We found a brush pile on which we threw ourselves and in a jiffy we were asleep. It was long after daylight when I awoke. I lay still a good while, wondering why the men were so quiet. I could not hear the least noise. I raised my head and looked around me—not a living soul in sight. The Regiment had fell in very quietly during the night and gone off. I buckled on my knapsack and grub sack and bolted for our lines—to reach the river, if possible, before the pontoons would be gone ... I tell you, I never felt so good. So, on I went and joined the Regiment which was about crossing the river and from thence to camp." *May 17, 1863*

"Our march through Virginia up into Pennsylvania we averaged 25 and 30 miles a day ... Fought the Battle of Gettysburg which culminated, as you know, in Lee retreating. We followed and had, near Williamsport, the enemy in our grasp. But 'Corduoy Meade' was afraid of a few rifle pits and let him escape without loss ... The fact of the matter is Meade was afraid of Lee. At Gettysburg we acted solely on the defensive; had a splendid position [Little Round Top] and held it by superiority of forces, guns, etc." *July 21, 1863*

"What occurred there [Gettysburg] has been widely disseminated, but all the losses were not reported. You may look in vain for reports of the loss of my knapsack and coffee pot ... All my valuables went higher than 'Gilroy's Kite.' But what's the use of grumbling? I ought to be thankful I did not lose my head on that terrible field of carnage." *July 31, 1863*

"Here I am home once more. In consequence of the severe service rendered and the great losses suffered (being cut up dreadfully), I have been placed in reserve. Old Grant told me to go home and rest myself awhile. [Following the Battle of the North Anna River.] 'I could a tale unfold, would harrow up thy very soul, freeze thy young blood, etc.' but I won't unfold it. All I would say is that after 19 consecutive days of fighting [the Overland Campaign], the enemy succeeded in inflicting a slight wound. For about two weeks I could not walk. Now I get around without the aid of crutch or stick." *June 17, 1864*

"Yesterday, the 21st, they [Confederates] undertook it on the left. I guess they did not know that Griffin's Division was here. A charge was made, General W. H. F. Lee's cavalry division in advance. Followed by the infantry. We were so well fixed for them that it cost no effort at all to send them back in confusion, capturing 1,200 prisoners. (Old Company F bagged a lieutenant and seven men.)" *August 22, 1864*

"Since I last wrote you, I have been under fire and a hot one too ... Our little Division, General Griffin's, did all the fighting. Yes, we charged a most formidable fort and line of works and captured them cheaply, that is with little loss. The Johnnies don't fight with the same vigor they did in the Wilderness.

"About 5 p.m. the enemy charged the Ninth Corps and they broke. In five minutes, we were double-quicking to the rescue, rushed into the gap and hurled the confident Rebs back. They came in again in three lines of battle, but our little Division of 3,000 muskets stood like a wall of iron. By this time, it was quite dark and I had been riding backwards and forwards along the line, bullets flying like hail and shells bursting on all sides. Yet I and my good horse escaped. It was a grand terrific sight. The streak of fire along the whole line, the red flame of thousands of muskets, the huge volume of fire belching from the cannon's mouth, the illumination of shells bursting overhead—all was distinctly visible in the surrounding darkness ... I want to tell you that we whipped them handsomely and I came out alright." *October 8, 1864*

"We started at 3 a.m. ... Of course, we had not far to go until we butted against the enemies' works protecting the railroad. I had the good fortune to be sent on the skirmish line with 200 men of our Regiment; and we advanced our line to within 50 yards of the Rebel breastworks, driving their skirmishers into them. Their sharpshooters then got at work firing through loopholes and killed and wounded quite a number of our Regiment. Anybody showing himself in one spot was almost sure to be hit. Every man had his tree and, if in an unguarded moment he disclosed any part of his person, he was almost sure to be shot. It's an exciting place – a skirmish line – fascinating to me. It's dreaded by a great many, but I would sooner fight so then in line of battle." *November 4, 1864*

**In addition to his reports on the battles he engaged in, McClelland also shared his reflections on the war's effect on him. In the waning days of his service, his view became increasingly pessimistic.**

"Well Lizzie, I am very dull and stupid. I'm afraid it's becoming part of my nature—I have been musing again. I was thinking, should I ever get through this war safe and in after years looking back over my past life, I should ask myself where three years have gone. How was that period of maturing youth (19–23) been spent? I could not answer. A perfect blank. Three years lost, gone, forever gone for which I have nothing to show." *November 21, 1863*

"The world is cold, unfeeling, heartless and I must work my way through it all. But if I can only get a start, I'll fight it. Then sometimes the feeling creeps over me that this is the only fight I am called to engage earthy—and it behooves me to fight that good fight heavenly. Here I leave you with the fervent hope that—in the unveiled presence of that infinite all perfect and eternal One, we may again meet, That Eternal One in whose presence there is fullness of joy and whose right hand there are pleasures for ever more." *January 20, 1865*

"The last bugle has sounded, the last shrill pipe of the fife and the last stirring drum beat and the Army of the Potomac sleeps .... As the last tune of martial music expires, the duties and trials of the soldier seem to vanish and I am transformed into another nature.

"Memory carries me back to infancy and the retrospection is sad. I think of our once bright, cheerful home when all was joy and gladness. I think of the gradual disruption of that home, broken up piecemeal ... I think of it all—of those saddest of all words 'what might have been' down to the living present. Then the bitter pang of self-accusation thrills through me when I consider what little I have done; the many things left undone; the hitherto profitless life spent ... It occurred to me how soon the quietness of this pleasant morning may be broken by the shrieking of shells, the murderous rattle of musketry, the rushing of steeds and men in deadly conflict, and the heart-piercing groans of the wounded and dying. Yes, this is the life of a soldier—above all others he feels that he knows not what a day or an hour may bring forth." *March 15, 1865*

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.



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