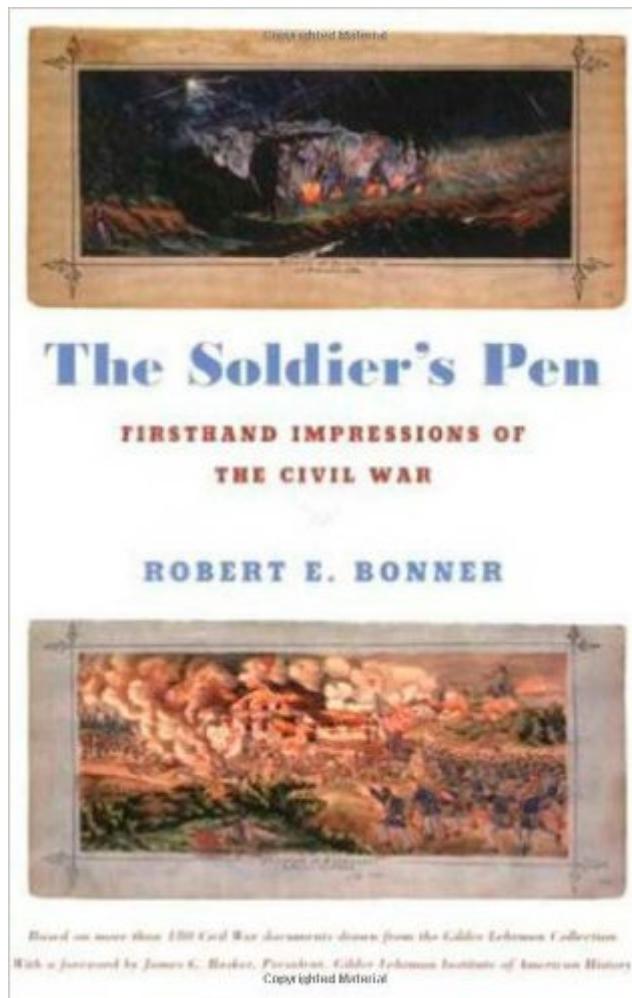


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The Soldier's Pen: Firsthand Impressions Of The Civil War



Synopsis

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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In *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.

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