

Dying of nostalgia: Homesickness in the Union Army during the Civil War.

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Civil War History

The Kent State University Press

Volume 56, Number 3, September 2010

pp. 247-282

10.1353/cwh.2010.0001

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Dying of Nostalgia: Homesickness in the Union Army during the Civil War

David Anderson (bio)

In a chapter from his *Echoes of the Civil War As I Hear Them* (1905), entitled “The Humor of Field and Camp,” Wisconsin officer Michael Hendrick Fitch recalled an amusing caper involving William Cumback, a representative from Indiana, who “told a good joke on himself as well as his wife, regarding this word, ‘Nostalgia.’” While visiting regiments from his home state, an officer informed Cumback that several soldiers were afflicted with a sometime-deadly disease known as nostalgia. Entirely mystified by this seemingly pervasive ailment, Cumback sought counsel from a regimental surgeon who clued-in the baffled politician as to medical terminology. Spotting an opportunity ripe for mischief-making, Cumback wrote his wife to note that “a great many” Indiana soldiers were “suffering with nostalgia,” adding that he too had “a touch of it” but doubted its severity. Panicked by her husband’s admission, Mrs. Cumback rushed the unwelcome news to the [End Page 247] family doctor, whereupon he informed her that her husband was suffering from a simple case of homesickness.¹

Astiride the story’s wider allusions to the nature and extent of illness and the efficacy of medical care during the Civil War, there rests, of course, Fitch’s juxtaposition of homesickness and nostalgia. Conceived originally as a type of homesickness that plagued seventeenth-century Swiss mercenaries while they warred abroad, nostalgia (from the Greek *nostos*, a yearning to return home, and *algos*, pain) became all-too-familiar to doctors and surgeons during the Civil War, and they readily acknowledged the condition as a bona fide disease. As scholars from many diverse disciplines continue to reflect upon nostalgia’s myriad guises and significances, a discussion of nostalgia’s relationship to homesickness suggests itself.²

To be sure, Fitch’s humorous aside raises a number of important questions for historians of the Civil War. What predicated the nostalgia of the average soldier during the conflict? Were there any marked differences between the sufferings of Union soldiers and those of their Confederate adversaries? What were the symptoms? Was there a remedy? Why did ideas and images of home become the poignant focus

for so many adolescent men? Did notions of home (and its associations) have any kind of cultural resonance with these young Americans? Were soldiers the only ones who suffered from the affliction? Given the recent explosion of interest in the social history of the era and current attention afforded to the history of medicine and the history of disability, these questions are significant and timely ones and they have excited some interest among historians of the Civil War, especially in a plethora of soldier studies to have emerged within Civil War historiography since the 1980s.³ **[End Page 248]**

In 1984 Donald Lee Anderson and Godfrey Tryggve Anderson, in their largely forgotten study, “Nostalgia and Malingering in the Military during the Civil War,” set out parameters for future debate with their examination of homesickness and indolence among Union combatants, but did little to suggest any relationship between the two. For Eric T. Dean Jr., writing in the 1990s, nostalgia appeared among Civil War soldiers as a depression borne of disorientation, a stress anxiety induced by the trauma of combat and an antecedent to twentieth-century shell-shock, combat fatigue, and post-traumatic stress disorder. More recently, Frances Clarke has offered a revision of this hypothesis, suggesting the emphasis that recent war trauma scholarship has placed upon the horrors of combat and on observing its devastation is misplaced; rather, the nostalgia of Union combatants, the focus of her study, underscored their dislocation from familiar surroundings and spoke compellingly to the fracturing of family ties as the “most distressing trials that a soldier could undergo.”⁴ Regrettably, each study largely ignores homesickness among Confederate soldiers and bypasses any extended discussion of homesickness in wider historical contexts. Thinking through the vexing problem of homesickness among Civil War combatants alongside earlier European deliberations on the subject prompts us to recognize the remarkable consistency of nostalgia to strike at potentially any soldier displaced from home.

Although these studies offer important and thoughtful insights into homesickness among Union...

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Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Annual Conference of the Scottish Association for the Study of America (SASA), University of Edinburgh, Mar. 2, 2007; at the University of Dundee History Program Research Seminar in Feb. 2008; and to the "Nostalgia and the Shapes of History" Conference at Queen Mary, University of London, June 13, 2008, where it benefited in each instance from the criticisms and comments of colleagues and postgraduates. I am especially grateful to Anja Johansen, Stephen McVeigh, Jon Roper, Christopher Storr, and the two anonymous readers for *Civil War History*. I would also like to thank the British Association for American Studies (BAAS) for a Founders' Research Travel Award that allowed for additional research to be undertaken.

Civil War History, Vol. IVI No. 3 © 2010 by The Kent State University Press



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