

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Soldiers' Letters and Diaries

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Civil War soldiers were among the most literate in history. About eight out of every ten Confederate soldiers and nine out of every ten Union soldiers could read and write. The letters and diaries written by Union and Confederate soldiers have bequeathed to scholars in the field the unusual problem of having an overabundance of firsthand accounts to consult. In turn, Civil War historians have relied heavily and at times exclusively on soldiers' letters and diaries to craft groundbreaking works on how the conflict unfolded and what it meant to participants. Any student or scholar of the Civil War who wants to know what contemporaries believed to be the cause of the war; how the war dragged on for four deadly years; or how the course of the war reshaped the attitudes and beliefs of those who experienced it must turn to the work of historians who spent thousands of hours combing through the writings of Civil War soldiers to find answers to these questions. Without the mountain of letters and diaries written by Civil War soldiers that in one form or another have survived to the present, we would have a much dimmer understanding of that conflict and of nineteenth-century American history. Yet much disagreement remains on how historians should use these sources and what they ultimately reveal about the men who fought the Civil War. In fact, one of the most influential historians of the Civil War Era recently argued that historians' indiscriminate use of soldiers' letters and diaries has led scholarship on Civil War soldiers to "a point of diminishing returns."¹

The purpose of this essay, then, is threefold. It is first to illuminate the origins of Civil War soldiers' letters and diaries with particular attention to the logistics of their creation and the number of them. Having examined their origins, the essay will then turn to where and in what form the writings of Civil War soldiers can be found today. The bulk of the essay discusses how scholarly usage of Civil War soldiers' diaries and letters has changed over time and where historians agree and disagree about the conclusions that can be drawn from soldiers' writings. A brief conclusion draws attention to innovative recent works that illustrate how historians might continue to use soldiers' letters and diaries moving forward.

Civil War soldiers' letters and diaries were as diverse in terms of their creation as the individuals responsible for them. Where and when a soldier had an opportunity to put

¹ Gary Gallagher, *The Union War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 61.

pen (or pencil) to paper depended on what time of year it was, whether that soldier's unit was actively campaigning, and what objects might be available to assist in the mechanics of writing. Winter quarters generally afforded soldiers with chairs, desks, and dependable supplies of paper and ink. But during the spring, summer, and fall months, soldiers in the field had to improvise. Knees and thighs, books, tins, and instruments became desks, as did the backs of fellow soldiers. Union Private Abraham Kendig wrote a letter to his family in 1861 "[b]y light of a candle stuck in a pine stick, setting on the ground leaning against Bruce Wallace who is asleep."² If all else failed, lying in the prone position with the ground as a surface was always an option. Soldiers wrote whenever they had spare time. Some surviving letters include reports of fighting that forced the author to drop his pen only to pick it up again once the shooting had died down.³

A combination of socioeconomic background, rank, and timing dictated what was available for soldiers to write with. Ink was preferable though not always available, and the frequent use of pencil was unavoidable, much to the chagrin of future generations who have tried to decipher the faded contents of penciled letters and diaries. Stationery, according to the historian Reid Mitchell, was "anything handy," including but not limited to "backs of military forms, old brown paper, [and] letters from home."⁴ Soldiers with the means to do so could purchase more formal stationery, some of which included illustrations of famous commanders, notable forts, and patriotic emblems. Diaries were fashioned out of ledger books, pocket-sized daily calendars, and scraps of paper stitched or strung together. Surviving letter collections from an individual soldier might include several different types of stationery, while diaries might skip days and months or end abruptly when a soldier found a sturdier book.⁵ While most soldiers had little trouble acquiring rudimentary writing implements (i.e., pencils and scraps of paper), most surviving letters and diaries are necessarily made up of more durable materials that were more readily accessible to officers and wealthier men in the ranks.⁶

While it is impossible to determine with precision how many letters or diaries were produced by Civil War soldiers, the numbers must have been staggering. More than three million soldiers served in the Civil War, and literacy rates on both sides were high (above 80% for Confederate soldiers and near 90% for Union soldiers).⁷ Of course, literacy rates were lower for certain groups within the ranks, particularly among the more

² Kendig quoted in Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1952), 183-4.

³ Wiley, *Life of Billy Yank*, 184.

⁴ Reid Mitchell, *Civil War Soldiers* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1988), 90.

⁵ See for example Michael Donlon Letters, *Civil War Miscellaneous Collection*, United States Army Military History Institute. Carlisle, PA [hereafter cited as MHI]; Charles Gardner Diary, 1864-1865. Massachusetts State Archives [hereafter cited as MSA].

⁶ For additional discussion of the circumstances behind soldiers' writing, see Wiley, *Life of Billy Yank*, 183-91; Wiley, *The Life of Johnny Reb: The Common Soldier of the Confederacy* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1943), 201-8.

⁷ Chandra Manning, *What this Cruel War was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 227, f.n. 17; James McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), viii.

than 100,000 recently-freed slaves who fought for the Union and foreign-born soldiers on both sides. But soldiers who could not write often dictated letters to literate comrades, and some learned to write while in the army.⁸ Of the approximately 900,000 Confederate soldiers, at least 700,000 had the ability to write, and of the nearly 2,000,000 white Union soldiers, at least 1.8 million could do the same.⁹ But the frequency with which Civil War soldiers wrote is much more difficult to determine. To give just two variables, soldiers were more likely to write letters during their first months of service, and they had more time and amenities for writing while in camp.¹⁰ Still, some evidence allows for a very rough approximation of the volume of soldiers' letters. In *The Union War*, Gary Gallagher notes that one Union regimental chaplain sent out 3,855 letters in a single month. Allowing for variations in volume depending on the time of year and overall strength of this regiment, Gallagher estimates that soldiers in the chaplain's regiment might have produced some 15,000 letters in one year. Applying this line of analysis to the Army of the Potomac as a whole, Gallagher hazarded a hypothetical estimate of more than a million letters written per month.¹¹ In his pioneering study of the common Union soldier, Bell Irvin Wiley wrote of a civilian observer who found that some northern regiments were sending out 600 letters per day in the fall of 1861. Wiley also found a single Union soldier who wrote 164 letters for himself and 37 letters for comrades over the course of 1863.¹² A fair assessment is that soldiers in the Civil War wrote several millions of letters and at the very least tens of thousands of diaries.

Whose letters and diaries survived, and where are they now? While a relatively small number of archival institutions hold a substantial portion of surviving soldiers' letters and diaries, there can be no definitive answer as to where all of these materials are or even what proportion of surviving letters and diaries have been archived or published. It might seem reasonable to assume that states which sent the most soldiers into the army hold the largest manuscript collections of Civil War soldiers' letters and diaries. But according to the historian James McPherson, native-born, middle- and upper-class Americans were more likely to preserve a family member's letters or diaries than blue-collar, immigrant, African American, or non-slaveholding families.¹³ States like New York and Pennsylvania, for which larger numbers of foreign-born soldiers fought, and North Carolina and Virginia, for which larger numbers of soldiers from non-slaveholding families fought, might be underrepresented in terms of the total number of surviving letters and diaries written by their soldiers. And while family and friends who preserved soldiers' writings usually deposited them at institutions in their community or state, some institutions like the Library of Congress, the Huntington Library, and United States Army

⁸ Bell Irvin Wiley, *Life of Johnny Reb*, 207; Dudley Taylor Cornish, "The Union Army as a School for Negroes," *Journal of Negro History* 37, 4 (October 1952): 368-82.

⁹ Totals for Union and Confederate soldiers from Mark A. Vinovskis, "Have Social Historians Lost the Civil War? Some Preliminary Demographic Speculations," *The Journal of American History* 76, 1 (June 1989): 40.

¹⁰ Wiley, *Life of Billy Yank*, 183; Gallagher, *The Union War*, 57.

¹¹ Gallagher, *The Union War*, 57-58.

¹² Wiley, *Life of Billy Yank*, 183.

¹³ McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*, ix.

Military History Institute host collections that are national in scope. This is to say nothing of private collectors. Texas businessman and historic preservationist John L. Nau III, one of the largest private collectors in the United States, has a collection of soldiers' letters and diaries that numbers in the thousands.¹⁴ Due to these circumstances, surviving letters and diaries do not form an aggregate representative sample of the wartime writing of soldiers who served in the Union and Confederate armies. Additionally, these materials are scattered across the country in such a way that begs the question of where to begin.

However, the footnotes, bibliographies, and acknowledgements sections of scholarship on Civil War soldiers will point readers to a handful of archives that hold exceptionally large manuscript collections of soldiers' letters and diaries. The holdings of the United States Army Military History Institute are especially well-represented in studies of Civil War soldiers, and for good reason: a 127-page, single-spaced inventory of its Civil War Document Collection (comprised mostly of soldiers' letters and diaries) details only a portion of the Institute's Civil War manuscript holdings.¹⁵ Several university research libraries in the South a smaller number in the Midwest hold ample collections of Civil War soldiers' writings. Bell Irvin Wiley's seminal studies of Union and Confederate soldiers drew extensively from manuscript collections at Duke University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Emory University, Louisiana State University, and the University of Michigan.¹⁶ More than half a century later, these same institutions continue to fill out the bibliographies of scholarship on Civil War soldiers.¹⁷ Finally, many of the major historical societies and public research libraries in states that took part in the Civil War hold sizable collections of soldiers' writings. A few of the most often cited include the Western Reserve Historical Society (Cleveland), the Connecticut Historical Society (Hartford), the Chicago Historical Society, the New York State Library (Albany), the Filson Club Historical Society (Louisville, KY), the Tennessee Historical Society (Nashville), and the Virginia Historical Society (Richmond). The institutions mentioned here by no means constitute an exhaustive or ranked listing. Rather, they exemplify the types of institutions where interested parties can locate substantial collections of soldiers' writings, and they illustrate the logistical difficulties of consulting anything close to a large sampling of surviving letters and diaries.

¹⁴ "John Nau shares his passion for history with Houston," *Houston Chronicle*, February 24, 2013, accessed September 9, 2014 <http://www.chron.com/about/houston-gives/article/John-Nau-shares-his-passion-for-history-with-4290499.php>.

¹⁵ United States Army Military History Institute, "Civil War Document Collection: An Inventory." For works that draw extensively from the Institute's collection of soldiers' letters and diaries, see for example McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*; Manning, *This Cruel War*; Kenneth W. Noe, *Reluctant Rebels: The Confederates Who Joined the Army after 1861* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

¹⁶ Wiley, *Life of Billy Yank*, 438; Wiley, *Life of Johnny Reb*, 419.

¹⁷ Reid Mitchell, *Civil War Soldiers* (New York: Viking, 1988), 247-52; McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*, 187-8; Manning, *This Cruel War*, 311-23; Noe, *Reluctant Rebels*, 289-94.

Fortunately, for scholars without the means to travel and especially for undergraduate and graduate students approaching the subject of Civil War soldiers for the first time, there are scores of excellent published collections of soldiers' letters and diaries sitting on library shelves. The most useful of these collections have been carefully edited by historians with a thorough knowledge of soldiering in the Civil War, the regions or battles discussed in the soldier's writing, or a particular group with whom the soldier can be identified, such as immigrants, African Americans, or evangelicals.¹⁸ By not only making accessible the contents of a soldier's wartime letters or diary but also correcting factual misstatements, filling in the gaps of knowledge endemic to any firsthand account, and pointing the reader to additional pertinent sources, such edited volumes can be invaluable resources for experienced and first-time researchers alike.¹⁹

The history of the publication of soldiers' letters and diaries also reveals much about how historians' and the public's interests in these sources have evolved. To the extent that soldiers' letters or diaries were transcribed and published in the century or so after the war ended, they were usually written by generals and other high-ranking officers.²⁰ Debates over battlefield tactics, military leadership, and high-level political decision making dominated Civil War scholarship until the mid-twentieth century, and the correspondence and diaries (as well as the memoirs) of commanding officers helped to settle the score on these issues. Historians writing during and in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement raised what are now essential questions in Civil War scholarship pertaining to slavery, race, and emancipation, however few thought to seek answers to these questions in the letters or diaries of soldiers.²¹ Not until the 1980s did interest in the common Civil War soldier reach a critical mass that allowed edited volumes of soldiers' letters and diaries to become staple publications.²² The belated but fruitful entry of social history into Civil War scholarship, as well as the opportunity to sell firsthand

¹⁸ See for example Christian G. Samito, ed., *Commanding Boston's Irish Ninth: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Patrick R. Guiney* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998); Walter D. Kamphoefner and Wolfgang Helbich, eds., *Germans in the Civil War: The Letters they Wrote Home*, trans. Susan Carter Vogel (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Noah Andre Trudeau, ed., *Voices of the 55th: Letters from the 55th Massachusetts Volunteers, 1861-1865* (Dayton, OH: Morningside, 1996); Jean Lee Cole and Aaron Sheehan-Dean, eds., *Freedom's Witness: The Civil War Correspondence of Henry McNeal Turner* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2013); W. Eric Ericson and Karen Stokes, eds., *Faith, Valor and Devotion: The Civil War Letters of William Porcher DuBose* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010).

¹⁹ Several Civil War bibliographies include published volumes of soldiers' letters and diaries in their contents. See Judith Lee Hallock, "Memoirs, Diaries, and Letters," in Steven E. Woodworth, ed., *The American Civil War: A Handbook of Literature and Research* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 72-74; Alan Nevins, James I. Robertson, Jr., and Bell I. Wiley, eds., *Civil War Books: A Critical Bibliography*, 2 vols. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967-1969); C.E. Dornbusch, comp., *Regimental Publications and Personal Narratives of the Civil War: A Checklist*, 2 vols. (New York: New York Public Library, 1961-1972).

²⁰ This point is made in Wiley, *Life of Billy Yank*, 439.

²¹ For two later works that did use soldiers' letters and diaries to examine the issues of slavery, race, and emancipation, see Manning, *This Cruel War*; Joseph T. Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (New York: Free Press, 1990).

²² For examples, see the works cited in Hallock, "Memoirs, Diaries, and Letters," 60-65.

accounts of soldiers' wartime experiences to ever-increasing crowds of battlefield tourists, probably best explains the uptick in the number of soldiers' letters and diaries published over the last three decades.²³ Ken Burns' 1990 PBS documentary *The Civil War* has introduced millions of Americans to the writing of Civil War soldiers. A reading of Major Sullivan Ballou's letter to his wife on the eve of the Battle of Bull Run—set to the mournful tune of “Ashokan Farewell”—conveyed to listeners in an unparalleled way soldiers' feelings of honor, duty, patriotism, and manhood. *The Civil War* also quoted liberally from the published diary of Elisha Hunt Rhodes, a Rhode Island soldier who enlisted as a private in 1861 and was mustered out as a colonel in 1865. This wildly popular documentary's spotlight on what Burns describes as Rhodes' “simple, unvarnished” prose doubtless heightened the public's interest in other soldiers' wartime correspondence and diaries.²⁴

Most Civil War soldiers could not match Rhodes's epistolary economy and poignancy, but the contents and style of their letters and diaries are nonetheless compelling. Soldiers commonly began by telling their correspondent, “I seat myself” or “I take pen in hand” to write, only to continue by lamenting the lack of anything noteworthy to write about. Yet their letters could continue on for pages, covering, in the words of Bell Irvin Wiley, “everything, for there is hardly an item in the entire range of human activity and interest that does not find some place in their correspondence.”²⁵ Wiley's extensive research in soldiers' letters led him to conclude that less-educated soldiers were more apt to write about the seedier side of army life, while more refined writers tended to omit grisly details of battles and camp.²⁶ Spelling and grammar ran the gamut from soldiers trained in Latin and Greek to soldiers barely able to spell their names, though most authors were mediocre at best. In *The Life of Johnny Reb*, Wiley provided readers with a chart of commonly misspelled words in soldiers' letters and diaries, such as “dus” (does), “snode” (snowed), and four variations on hospital.²⁷

Above all else, most readers are drawn to these sources because they unveil the human element of war. Historians who rely on wartime letters as evidence in their scholarship often point out that soldiers' correspondence was uncensored, allowing for unusually frank, forthright commentary on the war by those who fought it.²⁸ It was not ideology or political opinion but rather the mundane ephemera of army life and a ground-level perspective on the course of the war that the pioneering work of Bell Irvine Wiley recovered from soldiers' letters and diaries.²⁹ Wiley has the distinction of having

²³ Marc A. Vinovskis, “Have Social Historians Lost the Civil War? Some Preliminary Demographic Speculations,” *The Journal of American History* 76, 1 (June 1989): 34-58.

²⁴ Ken Burns, “Why I decided to make *The Civil War*,” accessed September 10, 2014, <http://www.pbs.org/civilwar/film/>.

²⁵ Wiley, *Life of Johnny Reb*, 207.

²⁶ Wiley, *Life of Billy Yank*, 184-5.

²⁷ Wiley, *Life of Johnny Reb*, 203-4.

²⁸ McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*, vii; Manning, *This Cruel War*, 9; Jason Phillips, “Battling Stereotypes: A Taxonomy of Common Soldiers in Civil War History,” *History Compass* 6, 6 (2008): 1408.

²⁹ Wiley, *Life of Johnny Reb*; Wiley, *Life of Billy Yank*.

originated the subfield of scholarship on Civil War soldiers, and his books on Confederate and Union soldiers, respectively, drew extensively from manuscript collections of soldiers' writing.³⁰ Thanks to a wide-ranging examination of soldiers' letters and diaries, Wiley was able to write vividly about what soldiers ate, how they viewed the enemy, what they did for recreation, how they responded to hard times, and even (as the notes to this essay will show) how they wrote their letters. However, Wiley wrote as opinion polls taken during World War II revealed that most American GIs cared or knew little about the political issues at stake in the war, and he mistakenly assumed the same to be true of Civil War soldiers.³¹ Inevitably, then, Wiley discounted the potential for soldiers' writing to illuminate commonly held ideas and beliefs about the Civil War.

Not until Americans fought their most domestically divisive war since the Civil War did scholarship on Civil War soldiers reach a formative state. The Vietnam War challenged deep-seated notions of American servicemen as timelessly indefatigable fighters (a view that Wiley himself helped to perpetuate), prompting some Civil War historians to question if that perspective was warranted in the first place.³² Thus began the ongoing debate over the motivations of Civil War soldiers that has dominated scholarship in this field since the 1980s. To be fair, not only the Vietnam War but also the rise of social history as a distinct category of analysis and the influence of European military history pushed historians to ask new questions about Civil War soldiers.³³ Additionally, post-Vietnam scholarship on Civil War soldiers moved beyond the basic issue of why soldiers fought by examining how they adjusted to army life and combat, how antebellum culture and society molded their wartime experiences, and how they shaped the progression of military strategies and policies.³⁴ But since the question of motivation remains paramount in the field, almost all studies of Civil War soldiers since the early-1980s have made claims about the nature of soldiers' ideologies and political opinions. The letters and diaries written by Union and Confederate soldiers comprise the largest and most insightful body of evidence that historians have consulted in order to make such claims.

³⁰ On Wiley's importance, see Aaron Sheehan-Dean, "The Blue and the Gray in Black and White: Assessing the Scholarship on Civil War Soldiers," in Dean, ed., *The View from the Ground: Experiences of Civil War Soldiers* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 11; McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*, 91.

³¹ Wiley, *Life of Billy Yank*, 39-40; McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*, 94.

³² Phillips, "Battling Stereotypes," 1410; Carol Reardon, "Civil War Military Campaigns: The Union," in Lacy K. Ford, ed., *A Companion to the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, Inc., 2005), 11. The definitive work among scholars who answered "no" to this question is Gerald Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: Free Press, 1989).

³³ Sheehan-Dean, "The Blue and the Gray," 12-13; Marvin R. Cain, "A 'Face of Battle' Needed: An Assessment of Motives and Men in Civil War Historiography," *Civil War History* 28 (1982): 5-27.

³⁴ For examples, see Earl J. Hess, *The Union Soldier in Battle: Enduring the Ordeal of Combat* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997); Joseph T. Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond: Sherman's Troops in the Savannah and Carolinas Campaign* (New York: New York University Press, 1985); Reid Mitchell, *The Vacant Chair: The Northern Soldier Leaves Home* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Mark Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War: Union Military Policy Towards Southern Civilians, 1861-1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

What historians have said and where they disagree about Civil War soldiers' views is less of a concern here than how they have used wartime letters and diaries to reach their conclusions.³⁵ The historian Gary Gallagher posits that the "most diligent scholars visited repositories across the United States to survey collections of letters, as well as a smaller number of diaries, en route to generalizing about soldiers' experiences. They strove for representativeness, looking at soldiers of different classes..., from different regions, and with varying types of service."³⁶ Two of the most influential works that fit Gallagher's qualifications are James McPherson's *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought the Civil War* and Chandra Manning's *What this Cruel War was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War*. The two books address related but ultimately separate questions regarding Civil War soldiers' motivations and ideologies. More importantly, both authors discuss the nature of their sources and the methodologies on which their conclusions are based. McPherson's "quasi-representative" sample of letter collections and diaries includes 1,076 soldiers (647 Union and 429 Confederate). African Americans and foreign-born soldiers are "substantially underrepresented" in his sources, but soldiers who died in combat (those who actually fought, as McPherson contends) are overrepresented.³⁷ Manning drew from the writing of 58 more soldiers than McPherson (657 Union soldiers and 477 Confederates), and she claims better "approximate cross sections" of the Union and Confederate ranks.³⁸ Both scholars visited dozens of archival repositories (22 research libraries and several private collections for McPherson; more than 40 archival repositories for Manning), and each read thousands of individual letters and hundreds of diaries in order to discern common experiences and views among the soldiers in their studies.³⁹ In terms of the breadth of their sources, McPherson's and Manning's studies are truly impressive, and each offers a bold, compelling argument about the "common" soldier in the Civil War.

But just what makes one soldier or a group of about 1,000 soldiers "common?" Even studies as rigorous as McPherson's and Manning's could not (and it is worth noting did not) claim a truly representative sample of Civil War soldiers. Illiteracy among certain segments of Civil War soldiers combined with the haphazard process by which soldiers' letters and diaries were preserved precludes any sampling of letters and diaries from being representative. All studies of Civil War soldiers that rely on such sources are therefore impressionistic to some degree.⁴⁰ As the historian Joseph T. Glatthaar points out, a plethora of firsthand testimony from the men who fought the Civil War allows scholars to "pluck something from a soldier's letter, diary, or memoir and make claims

³⁵ For a thorough historiographical overview of the field, see Sheehan-Dean, "The Blue and the Gray in Black and White."

³⁶ Gallagher, *The Union War*, 61.

³⁷ McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*, viii-ix. For criticism of how McPherson created his sample, see Phillips, "Battling Stereotypes," 1410-11.

³⁸ Manning, *This Cruel War*, 8-9. For criticism of Manning's methodology, especially how it influenced a key argument in her book, see Gallagher, *The Union War*, 80-81.

³⁹ McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*, 183-184; Manning, *This Cruel War*, 311-24.

⁴⁰ Gallagher, *The Union War*, 61.

that this opinion represents most or even a substantial portion of those soldiers.”⁴¹ These “politicized practices,” according to Kenneth Noe, are “lamentably frequent.”⁴² This is not to say that the letters and diaries used by scholars like McPherson and Manning did not demonstrate discernable patterns. The point in these critiques is that even historians who read hundreds of letter collections and diaries cannot be sure that the patterns they uncover are applicable to broad segments of the Union and Confederate armed forces.⁴³

Fortunately, several recent studies provide models for how historians can continue to use soldiers' letters and diaries while avoiding the traps of overreliance and representativeness. In *The Union War*, Gary Gallagher combined the writing of 350 soldiers with other types of evidence that complemented ideas expressed in soldiers' letters and diaries about the centrality of the Union to the northern war effort. Patriotic envelopes, lyrics to popular songs, and regimental histories written immediately after the war showed Gallagher that the pro-Union sentiment he found in his 350 soldiers' letters and diaries was ubiquitous throughout the ranks.⁴⁴ Joseph T. Glatthaar's work on the Army of Northern Virginia offers a more innovative approach to the problem of representativeness. To support his conclusions in *General Lee's Army: From Victory to Collapse*, Glatthaar worked with experts in statistics to develop a sample of 600 soldiers that is “almost equal to a pure random sample” of Lee's army.⁴⁵ Glatthaar did not abandon firsthand testimonies. Instead, he used the statistical sample to determine if patterns found in letters, diaries, and other firsthand accounts were unique to particular groups of soldiers.⁴⁶ Conversely, the historian Jason Phillips views representativeness as not only impossible but also undesirable. Phillips argues that historians would do better to focus on “influential groups” (one of whom was certainly the Army of Northern Virginia) who changed the course of the Civil War, drawing from firsthand accounts by and about them to explain how they exercised such decisive influences.⁴⁷ By following the approaches laid out by Gallagher, Glatthaar, and Phillips, and by asking new questions of the letters and diaries left behind by Union and Confederate soldiers, Civil War historians can fruitfully continue to mine this precious trove of sources.

⁴¹ Joseph T. Glatthaar, *Soldiering in the Army of Northern Virginia: A Statistical Portrait of the Troops Who Served under Robert E. Lee* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), xiii.

⁴² Noe, *Reluctant Rebels*, 13.

⁴³ On this point, see especially Phillips, “Battling Stereotypes.”

⁴⁴ Gallagher, *The Union War*, 62-74; 119-150.

⁴⁵ Glatthaar, *Soldiering in the Army of Northern Virginia*, xi; Glatthaar, *General Lee's Army: From Victory to Collapse* (New York: Free Press, 2008).

⁴⁶ For another exemplary work that combines quantitative and qualitative research, see Noe, *Reluctant Rebels*, especially 13-18.

⁴⁷ Phillips, “Battling Stereotypes,” 1418-19; Phillips, *Diehard Rebels: The Culture of Confederate Invincibility* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007).