



This Will Make a Man of Me: The Life and Letters of a Teenage Officer in the Civil War by James M. Scythes.

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Historian James Scythes's epistolary history explores the US Civil War from the perspective of seventeen-year-old Thomas James Howell, a 2nd lieutenant in the 3rd New Jersey Voluntary Infantry Regiment. Part I (17-70), "The Rough Life of a Soldier," documents Howell's trip to Virginia to inquire about a commission, as his regiment was relocating to join the Army of the Potomac on the Virginia Peninsula. Howell's twenty-seven letters home during the three months from 12 January to 15 April 1862 detail camp life and his new relationships—both amicable and contentious—with the men of his regiment. The thirty-eight letters in Part II (71-140), "Hot Work Soon Enough," concern his two-plus months, 15-26 June 1862, during Maj. Gen. George McClellan's Peninsula Campaign. Here we see a more sober Howell often reflecting on morality and mortality. The volume's conclusion recounts the circumstances of Howell's death in combat at Gaines' Mill (27 June 1862), his first battle.

Scythes (West Chester Univ.) makes Howell's maturation from boyhood to manhood the overarching theme for his work, noting that the transition to adulthood was unclear in nineteenth-century America (1-2). Howell sought to prove his manhood through military service, inspired by antebellum textbooks that romanticized wartime service and the lessons of his teacher, William Fewsmith, who taught Howell to embrace the chivalric glory of laying down one's life for one's fellow men (7-8). Howell and his siblings were also influenced by their father's anti-slavery views. The elder Howell supported a group of Philadelphia men arrested for blocking the forced return of escaped slave Moses Honnor in 1860 (9). After his father's death, Howell hoped to support his mother and siblings on a 2nd lieutenant's salary of \$105.50/month (11).

Scythes's interest in Thomas Howell began in 2000 when he was working as a volunteer at the Gloucester County Historical Society (GCHS) library, the repository of the Howell Family Collection, which contained Howell's uniform epaulets, his prayer book, and thirty-one of his original letters. Scythes purchased a further thirty-four transcripts of letters passed down through a descendant of Howell's sister Annie. He also acquired an additional four transcripts of letters written by Howell himself and an original letter by a neighbor commenting on Thomas's death.

Part I contains letters dating from Howell's commissioning to his joining the Army of the Potomac. In these we see Howell's march towards adulthood reflected first in idealistic and adventurous descriptions of army life:

I am writing these few lines after tea, at which we had oysters, etc giant bread, milk, sugar and very nice tea. You can see, that we do not suffer; I do not know what we shall have for breakfast or dinner tomorrow. After spending nearly the whole morning in Washington, I left for camp where I arrived safe and sound There is tremendous cheering going on in the camp of the 4th N.J. Vol. While I am writing the band is preparing to serenade me, they are doing it now; it is at the request of Lieut. Col. Brown. (36-37)

His tone changes sharply after he is almost killed in camp by friendly fire: “I wish you could hear a ball go through the air, one is not apt to forget the sound in a hurry[;] it reminds me of a child crying” (49). While on a picket, Howell’s company discovered a murdered civilian with his hands, feet, and head severed, leading Howell to conclude that “I must have a revolver” (42). Raised with middle-class Christian values, he recoiled at the war’s degradation of his camp mates:

There has been a court martial here for the last two or three days. The Major was presiding and three or four were tried and one was sentenced to stand on a barrel for twenty days Besides he has a string around his neck to which was attached a board on which was written the word “dirty” because he was the most unclean person in Company C Dr. Cox, our surgeon, is in arrest for treason which comes from the fact that the Dr. went with a flag of truce into the enemy lines after the battle of Bull Run (48)

Howell’s code of ethics prohibited imbibing liquor, smoking, cursing, and violating the sanctity of the Sabbath. This brought him into conflict with the hard-drinking Lt. Col. Henry W. Brown at whose behest Howell had been serenaded by the regimental band.

Parts I and II both begin by framing the content of Howell letters as evidence of what it meant to become a man. While Howell details many of his everyday experiences, Scythes highlights how a childlike zeal for adventure gave way to realistic depictions of the harshness of army life and the constant threat of attack. Scythes skillfully provides such contextual details without overshadowing the content of the letters themselves.

In Part II, on McClellan’s Peninsula Campaign and march toward Richmond, Howell’s painful lack of suitable boots becomes emblematic of his increasing dissatisfaction with military life. He began to change under the pressure. As his free time grew scarce, Howell no longer fully observed the Sabbath (92), began to drink beer, but not hard liquor (110), and engaged unchivalrously in looting an abandoned southern farmhouse—against the orders of his superiors (102). Two weeks before his death, Howell bargained in a letter to his mother that he would return home if he survived the taking of Richmond (119). Previously confident in his leadership, he admitted in a letter to his sister (three days before his death) that “I can lead my men as far as they will want to go” (126).

Howell’s story came to a swift end when, after congratulating a fellow soldier for surviving the Battle of Gaines’ Mills, he was virtually bisected by an enemy cannon ball. Scythe weaves together other voices to tell the story of the final battle. Howell’s friend Lt. Arch Taylor, described how Thomas had cheered his men onward in the battle; his servant, Pvt. Louis Loeb, described the carnage and disorientation of Howell’s first and final battle. Howell’s sister Annie’s efforts to memorialize her brother’s legacy are also briefly noted.

Recent studies of Union soldiers’ letters to their families typically tap collections spanning several years.¹ While there is less correspondence overall by Howell, it was produced in a shorter period of time (just over five months), making his output comparably significant. Scythes’s work is notable in featuring a seventeen-year-old 2nd lieutenant. Historians believe some 10–20 percent of Civil War soldiers lied about their age, perhaps as many as 420,000 boys in all.² But Howell

1. E.g., George N. Bliss et al., *Don’t Tell Father I Have Been Shot At: The Civil War Letters of Captain George N. Bliss, First Rhode Island Cavalry* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2018); Michael J. Larson and John David Smith, eds., *Dear Delia: The Civil War Letters of Captain Henry F. Young, Seventh Wisconsin Infantry* (Madison: U Wisconsin Pr, 2019), with review at *MiWSR* 2020-062; and William B. Boardman, “‘Pretty Well Worn Out’—The Journey of a Civil War Soldier: A Digital Archive of the Letters of William Hamilton,” *MiWSR* 2012-009.

2. See, further, Jim Murphy, *The Boys’ War: Confederate and Union Soldiers Talk about the Civil War* (NY: Clarion, 1990) 2.

hoped to support his family financially after his father's death (10). As a result, this particular edition of Civil War letters helps clarify what it meant to become a man in America in the second half of the nineteenth century. Howell's desire to emulate a gentleman officer based on the models provided by his peers, subordinates, and commanding officers evokes the mindset of temperate American young men of the Civil War period.

Students and scholars of military and social history, as well as interested general readers will find James Scythes's fine edition of a teenaged Civil War officer's letters both absorbing and instructive.