

Callow Brave and True : A Gospel of Civil War Youth

A Review By Garry Victor Hill



Callow Brave and True: A Gospel of Civil War Youth. By Jay. S. Hoar.
Gettysburg, Pa.; Thomas Publications, 1999. 267 pages. Illustrated.

Most Americans and people in the western nations feel horrified by televised images of child soldiers coming from Africa and the Middle East, and yet 150 years ago America itself probably had more child soldiers than can be seen in today's conflicts. The Civil War is sometimes called 'The Boys' War' and with good reasons. Rebecca Beatrice Brooks supports an estimate that at least a hundred thousand Union soldiers were under fifteen and that of the total enlistments on both

sides, around 20% were under eighteen.¹ As Professor Hoar makes clear in his preface, how many boys served in total will almost certainly never be known. Many probably died before their details were recorded and their stories told. Runaways lied about their age and proof seems to have rarely been required. One ten year old, Charles Eugene Merrick, got away with claiming eighteen years and ended up a guard. Recruiters and enlisting officers sometimes turned back obvious children or those with enquiring relatives, but they were often desperate for recruits and sometimes the runaways were along way from home – and therefore evidence. Inadequate records seldom state or even give hints on age. *Official Records* merely listed one Virginian infantryman in the 45th Infantry regiment, Alex Grillenwater: he turned out to be seven on enlistment and saw the four years long war through.² Charles Knecht, another seven year old, also saw those four years through as a musician – for the other side.

Often parents were proud of their boy's patriotism – even when they died. Others, eventually worn down by continual begging and attempted run offs, reluctantly agreed to enlistment. Professor Hoar gives examples where boys went into units with relatives. In one bizarre example six year old William Henry Bush had his own uniform tailor-made and joined his Unionist father, a captain and a surgeon – at Elmira Prison Camp. Being born in September 1857 made him the last born veteran.

Many of the youngsters served in bands as musicians, others as orderlies, foragers ostlers and couriers attached to staff. This did not apply to all of the youngsters. Infantry and cavalymen aged around fourteen were nothing unusual. As Union invasions came to the Confederacy many adult males in the militia or home guard units were conscripted and their places were taken by boys. They guarded public buildings, carried messages, trained, foraged for food and fuel, made clothing, destroyed supplies and bridges as the enemy approached and were sometimes drawn into the fighting. Professor Hoar mentions one of these Florida units as consisting of three hundred boys. Another similar company hauled supplies in Virginia with the regular army. He also mentions the battalion of boy couriers, based at Shreveport. According to the youngest aged twelve, none were over fifteen. For the Confederates there were other large battlefield units, predominantly made up of boys or teenagers. Susan R, Hull in her 1905 work *Boy Soldiers of the Confederacy* mentions several others.

¹ Rebecca Beatrice Brooks, 'Child Soldiers in the Civil War' *Civil War Saga* Posted 16th December 2011 p1. <http://civilwarsaga.com/child-soldiers-in-the-civil-war/>

² *Ibid* p6 comments contributed by a descendant.

Fortunately this book does not become a history of military units. Such works have a tendency to hagiography, to evade war's realities, to focus on the leaders and to ignore the human element. They are usually also boring.

Instead of going in that direction Professor Hoar focuses on the human element by telling the stories of the young enlistments in their own words. He has forty-eight biographical essays about the young soldiers. Two of these are for groups of brothers, the rest are individuals. Most are under fifteen, the youngest are six. Several have poignant photographs. We find out their varied motives for enlisting, how they managed to do that and then their war experiences, none of which are boring and all give a strong sense of how diverse war experiences could be.



Joseph N. Fissell (1852-1822) He enlisted as a Union drummer boy just before his tenth birthday. Serving in the same unit as two brothers, he saw three years of heavy campaigning in which he came under fire.

One of the most interesting of these biographical essays tells the life of the best known child soldier, Johnny Clem, 'the drummer boy of Chickamauga' best known as Johnny Shiloh after his incessant drumming did so much to rally troops

at that battle in the desperate moments when it seemed the Union lines would break. He went on to a military life and became a general. Professor Hoar examines the myths, fallacies, legends and stories that grew around him and puts them in their correct categories.

He usually concludes each section with what happened to the young veterans in later life and this is where *Callow Brave and True: A Gospel of Civil War Youth* has great practical value for today. Of all these enlistments almost none emerge with any sign of modern war's trauma among the veterans. Alcoholism, drug addiction, insanity and neurotic behaviour seem almost unknown. Most went on to live happy productive lives. There is a lesson here, but it seems that it will take another book to teach it.

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