Mekel on Schaller and Schaller, ‘Soldiering for Glory: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Frank Schaller, Twenty-Second Mississippi Infantry’

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**Soldiering for Himself: The Strange Career of Frank Schaller**

There are times when less information about a book's editors is more. It might prejudice some readers against this work to know that Mary W. Schaller is the recipient of the United Daughters of the Confederacy Jefferson Davis Gold Medal, as the jacket proclaims, and that her co-author and husband Martin is a distant cousin of the book's protagonist. The dedication to the editors' grandchildren "in grateful appreciation of their ancestors who have taken up arms in defense of their homes" (dedication page) will do little to alleviate concerns about their political leanings. It would be a mistake, however, to discard the book as a biased work of filiopietism. This collection of letters provides a rather iconoclastic account of a German immigrant soldier's relationship to his adopted country. Despite a number of recent works, especially Martin W. Oefele's *German-Speaking Officers in the U.S. Colored Troops, 1863-1867* (2004), that deal with the role of German-American soldiers in a more critical way, the stock image of the typical German immigrant, before and during the Civil War, is that of a principled, upright, freedom-loving supporter of the Union, whose outrage over slavery turned him into a staunch adherent to the abolitionist cause immediately upon arrival. While earlier German-American leaders and historians consciously fostered this image, even a cursory look at the German-language press of the 1850s and early 1860 will suffice to revise it radically.

The "hero" of the book, Colonel Frank Schaller (1835-81) of the Twenty-Second Mississippi Infantry, is one of the often forgotten Germans who fought for the Confederacy rather than the Union. Whether most of them did so out of a sense of duty, racism, for career advancement, or because of an adventurous disposition, it soon becomes clear that Schaller was hardly motivated by any idealistic motives when he chose to fight for the South--on the rare occasions that he fought at all, that is. What emerges instead is the character sketch of a vain, self-absorbed hypochondriac man who literally spent a large part of the war relieving himself. In fact, he mentions his "old complaint"--chronic diarrhea--so often that even the most sympathetic reader will roll her eyes. Although the term "psychosomatic" was unknown to Schaller's contemporaries, even they guessed as much when Schaller once again came down with stomach trouble the moment hostilities broke out, or as soon as he failed to get along with his soldiers or superiors, as he invariably did. *Soldiering for Glory* is thus a somewhat misleading title, since Schaller hardly engaged in soldiering, a fact about which the editors are surprisingly open: they state that during his entire time in the Confederate military, he only saw eight months and ten days of active duty.
The latter point, just as the apparent political baggage remarked upon above, contributes to the somewhat incongruous editorial tone. On the one hand, Schaller is portrayed as a fighter; on the other, his failings, if not to say near-cowardice, are freely admitted. Two more problems of the book are the sometimes flowery style of the editorial comments and the nearly complete absence of African Americans. We only meet one black person in the book, in a fleeting remark of Schaller's on an argument he observed, and a servant boy who was probably a slave, though neither Schaller nor the editors mention this explicitly. The absence of almost anything concerning slavery, a pertinent issue, seems strange. The editors would have done well to comment on why Schaller might not have expressed his views on slavery and blacks in a book that deals, after all, with the Civil War, rather than merely remarking that Schaller never owned any slaves and fought for Southern "independence" because he was a "romantic idealist" (pp. 2-3).

The structure of the book is quite simple. Each chapter consists of a number of letters, organized to comprise a certain period or mood in Schaller's life, introduced by a short essay furnishing the background of events he mentions, or shedding light on the career or future of persons he meets: the military academy in Hillsborough, North Carolina, where Schaller taught shortly before the outbreak of the war; his brief stay with the so-called Polish Brigade of Louisiana; or his grotesque confrontation with the Fifth Texas Infantry Regiment, whose men refused to accept Schaller as their commander and immediately got rid of him by shaving his horse's tail while he slept.

Apart from a few items in the correspondence, one of which was addressed to Jefferson Davis, the letters were written to Schaller's fiancée and later wife, Sophie Sosnowski of Columbia, South Carolina. It soon becomes clear that Schaller, a German immigrant of French ancestry from Saxony, who had come to the United States in 1855 after he had not exactly distinguished himself in the Crimean War, tried to impress this rather cool woman with patriotic rhetoric and self-serving tales of his many travails. Whether he succeeded in doing so is highly questionable (all but one of Sophie's letters were destroyed); his many attempts to curry favor with men of influence and complaints of being wronged, along with incessant reports about his health, may have bored Sophie as much as they may tire some readers. Furthermore, Schaller did not have much experience in terms of courage under fire: he only saw action twice, one time in the form of a skirmish, the other in that of the Battle of Shiloh in April 1862, where he was shot in the foot. Luckily for him, one is tempted to say, since it gave him a more credible excuse than his intestinal troubles for sick leaves (twenty-one months and five days in total) that lasted until his eventual resignation in June 1864, his half-hearted attempts to re-enlist notwithstanding. An epilogue recounts the rest of Schaller's unsuccessful life, which he spent struggling to make a living, widowed, away from his two daughters, and alone.

Both the introductory essays and the letters are well annotated, giving further information about such things as Schaller's fellow officers, friends, and battles. The letters are the only primary source cited in the body of the book, though for further information the editors often cite Schaller's diary, which was transcribed by his daughter, Ida. An additional interesting feature is the appended opinion of two present-day physicians, who evaluate Schaller's symptoms based on the nineteenth-century material presented to them by the editors. An informative and surprisingly critical book, Soldiering for Glory will be of interest for students of immigration, medical history, and Civil War as well as general military history.


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