

## [Roberts on Dretske, 'The Bonds of War: A Story of Immigrants and Esprit de Corps in Company C, 96th Illinois Volunteer Infantry'](#)

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**Diana Dretske.** *The Bonds of War: A Story of Immigrants and Esprit de Corps in Company C, 96th Illinois Volunteer Infantry.* Engaging the Civil War series. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University

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**Reviewed by** Timothy Roberts (Western Illinois University) **Published on** H-CivWar (December, 2021) **Commissioned by** G. David Schieffler (Crowder College)

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In 2015, Diana Dretske, curator of the Bess Bower Dunn Museum of Lake County in Libertyville, Illinois, came across a tintype of five Union soldiers, four of them unidentified at the time. Only the identity of the tintype donor's grandfather, Edward Murray, was known. Her research of the photograph, eventually yielding *The Bonds of War*, determined that Murray and the others were immigrants from the British Isles who enlisted in September 1862, fought, and sacrificed heavily for their new country. They served in the Army of Kentucky and then fought, first seeing combat at Chickamauga, as part of the Army of the Cumberland in the Civil War's western theater and in the Atlanta Campaign. Murray and Loughlin Madden Jr. were from Ireland. James Murrie and John Taylor came from Scotland, and William Lewin was English. From 1841 to 1854, each arrived, via the Erie Canal, in Lake County, Illinois, just north of Chicago.

Historians including, most recently, Christian Samito, Martin Öfele, and Alison Efford have previously studied the vital impact of immigrants, who comprised one-quarter of the US military, on the Union victory in the war.[1] Perhaps on the assumption that British American soldiers were not ethnically or religiously different from most native-born white Americans, however, their wartime and postwar experiences instrumental in assimilating as "Americans" have gained less attention than have those of Irish and German Americans. Claiming that exploration of the history of immigrant soldiers "upend[s]" the familiar narrative of the American-born soldier, Dretske's book seeks to fill that historiographical gap (p. 1).

Dretske's research in "microhistorical" materials is impressive in providing social context for these soldiers' service (p. 2). She draws on primary sources from fifteen different archives and other local and church published histories. She shows that, other than Madden, the men's evangelical Protestantism (Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian) encouraged not only their support for the Union but also, when it developed, the aim to abolish slavery. Were British immigrants in the ranks particularly sympathetic to the cause of the enslaved? In consideration of that question, *The Bonds of War* relies heavily on the regimental history, published in 1887, which, even as Dretske acknowledges, "was written with an eye to ... glorifying the service of its members" (p. 179). This source, while necessary to track the regiment's service record, is perhaps less reliable in considering possible debates within

its ranks about the Union's new goal of emancipation in 1863. A comparable official history of the 103rd Illinois Infantry Regiment, for example, likewise emphasizes the regiment's patriotic service but glosses over antiwar dissent sown by troops from the state's western and southern regions.[2]

Thus, Dretske states, without cross-examining the claim, "By its own calculation, the 96th Illinois assisted more enslaved people in escaping than many other regiments" (p. 53). Is the point that the 96th really was uniformly abolitionist, thus expressing Union soldiers' broad antislavery commitment emphasized by Chandra Manning in *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (2008)? Or, perhaps given Dretske's emphasis on immigrant troops' principled zeal, that the regiment merely believed or professed it was so?

This argument works poorly to fit Loughlin Madden's enlistment. Many Irish Catholic civilians and some soldiers feared the economic upheaval of millions of menial laborers suddenly entering the free labor workforce (by 1860 Edward Murray, though an Irish immigrant like Madden, had become a landowner and elected official as well as a Baptist). As Dretske acknowledges, poor Irish Americans' need to survive taught them to "protect their own interests" (p. 14).

However, regarding the others, Dretske's emphasis of their quest, in Taylor's words, to "be respected and acknowledged as good American Citizens" supports the notion that the 96th Illinois readily embraced the war's abolitionist turn (p. 3). As Don Doyle has shown in *The Cause of All Nations: An International History of the American Civil War* (2015), the larger perspective of many immigrants and foreigners showed them that the Civil War was a struggle for liberal democracy, to preserve and enhance an egalitarian society unimaginable in Europe.

Unfortunately, Taylor died of a wound sustained at the Battle of Chickamauga, and Madden died a prisoner at Andersonville Prison. The quintet's 40 percent wartime mortality rate grimly, but only modestly, exceeded the mortality rate of the 96th Illinois regiment itself. But local histories and newspaper collections reveal how in the postwar era Murray—despite suffering paraplegia as a result of a horrific wound sustained at Chickamauga—, Murrie, and Lewin held local political offices, organized Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) commemorative events, and received federal pensions. Ironically, among the three survivors, only Murrie, in 1893, became a naturalized US citizen—surely an afterthought after gaining the de facto citizenship (that is, social acceptance and political agency) that he and the others really craved. Diana Dretske's sensitive interpretation of immigrant soldiers' civic motivation may not upend scholarship on Union soldiers, but it does invite additional research on whether and how immigrant men perceived military service as a ticket to becoming "citizens."

## Notes

[1]. Christian Samito, *Becoming American under Fire: Irish Americans, African Americans, and the Politics of Citizenship in the Civil War Era* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009); Martin Ófele, *True Sons of the Republic: European Immigrants in the Union Army* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008); Alison Efford, *German Immigrants, Race, and Citizenship in the Civil War Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[2]. See *"This Infernal War": The Civil War Letters of William and Jane Standard*, ed. Timothy Roberts (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2018).

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