



*Dear Delia: the Civil War Letters of Captain Henry F. Young, Seventh Wisconsin Infantry* ed. Michael J. Larson and John David Smith.

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The letters gathered in *Dear Delia* paint an engaging portrait of one volunteer's experiences in the Civil War. Letter troves<sup>1</sup> form the basis of many historical accounts of the war. But, as editors Michael J. Larson (Menomonie Middle School) and John David Smith (Univ. of North Carolina-Charlotte) make clear, the letters in *Dear Delia* stand out because their author—Henry F. Young—was an astute and opinionated observer-participant of the war, who reported on the “innumerable details of military service—the brutality of internecine ‘hard war’; camp life; camaraderie, pettiness, and thievery among the troops; equipage; and food shortages,” as well as “his business affairs on the home front” (xv). This copiously annotated volume presents the 107 extant letters that Young addressed to his wife, along with 48 that he sent to Delia's father, Jared Warner.

Henry Young enlisted in the Union Army at age thirty-seven and served for three years in the 7th Wisconsin Regiment (21 Sept. 1861–3 Dec. 1864). The 7th Wisconsin, part of the “only all-western infantry brigade,” saw notable action and sustained higher-than-average loss of life at Second Bull Run, South Mountain (where Gen. George McClellan helped coin the nickname “Iron Brigade of the West”), Antietam, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, the Wilderness (where Young was wounded), Cold Harbor, and Petersburg (xxix, 97). In 1861, Young entered slave states for the first time in his life. After serving near African-American recruits who charged the exploded crater at Petersburg, he questioned their effectiveness, but had “nothing to say against the courage of the negro Division” (255).

Young's letters naturally describe military engagements as they occurred, but some anticipate significant events or criticize tactics or strategy long after the fact. Young sometimes got the facts wrong:

[his] carping about [Maj. Gen. Irvin] McDowell's not following McClellan to the peninsula was unwarranted. McDowell, who was in Fredericksburg, was ordered to join McClellan on May 17, an order that on May 24 was rescinded when McDowell was ordered to help trap Jackson in the Shenandoah Valley. (81)

Still fuming on July 5, Young wrote angrily to his father-in-law that “McDowell and his friends cheated little Mc[Clellan] out of fifty thousand of his best troops,” indicating that loyalty to McClellan may have clouded his judgment of other generals' actions.

Since he was often able to read both northern and southern newspaper accounts of troop movements, many of Young's letters to folks at home defy easy categorization, veering from mere

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1. Accessible in a myriad of private collections and public archives like the Wisconsin Historical Society, which preserves the papers of Henry Falls Young (1861–1902). For another accessible collection, see William B. Boardman, “Pretty Well Worn Out”—The Journey of a Civil War Soldier: A Digital Archive of the Letters of William Hamilton,” *MiWSR* 2013-009.

reportage—"I write from the field of battle some where below the mouth of the Rapadan River" (159)—toward more politically motivated observations of events to which he was not personally privy—"I am well satisfied that the fault of failure rest with the 3d Corps in taking the wrong road the day we crossed the River" (206). He often told his wife not to expect him to write "about military matters for you can learn more from the papers than I can tell you" (197), all the while excoriating the same papers for shoddy reporting. He could, however, revise his convictions after receiving new information.

More remarkably, Young sometimes gave voice to Confederate soldiers. In a letter to his father-in-law (23 Aug. 1863), he remarks that

the stories that the north and south could not live peaceably is all nonsense. The war has changed the opinions of the masses of the South. They knew nothing of the character of the people of the north. They were led to believe the people of the north were every thing that was low cowardly and mean but the war has taught them better. (183)

As evidence, he cites a conversation he overheard between a captured Confederate soldier from Georgia ("Geo" or "Georgia") and "one of our boys" ("yank"):

*Geo* come now dont hold us responsible for the lies that are published at the south. We are sick of hearing such stories just such d— lies got me into this. I tell you we knew nothing of you alls only we were told you were to cowardly to fight and you would steal our niggers. *yank*, why dont you desert. *Georgia* I swore in for three years. My times up next march.... I will admit I am tired of it and was sold when i enlisted but I have to much honour to back out. And so it goes [my italics]. (183)

This empathy with the enemy—one month after Gettysburg—seems incredibly poignant.

The editors' footnotes often flag inconsistencies in Young's letters or his lack of counterbalancing reports. Their meticulous research into newspaper reports of battles and elections, as well as second-hand accounts composed long after the war, allows them to comment, for instance, that "while inaccurate, one morning headline reinforced Young's view that the battle had ended more favorably than in reality" (233). On the other hand, his opinions often seem justified, if not impartial. The recently-promoted Captain Young waxed grandiloquent in early 1863, telling his wife optimistically that "when i come to think over other civil wars, and think of the length of time it has already taken to settle them, I again feel hopeful for our cause" (142). Although military leaders have often been prone to naive or wishful reasoning, in this instance, Young was eventually proven right.

The editors discuss only briefly the simultaneous presence and absence of Young's wife Delia and father-in-law Jared Warner, noting that "Delia's extraordinary educational experiences, unusual for even most elite women of her time, no doubt contributed to her ability to communicate so clearly and directly with Henry in her letters to him" (xxi). Unfortunately, these letters were lost sometime during or after the war, not an unusual thing in Civil War correspondence. Henry himself mentions to Delia and Jared that he has lost his account book (202) and that a book with some family photographs was "carried off" (280).

These regrettable losses notwithstanding, we may glean a good deal about the lives of Young's family members and the communities he belonged to in Wisconsin. For one thing, Delia was a confident, strong-minded letter writer with firm opinions about politics, military operations, and her husband's courage. She seems to have made decisions independent of him, such as her temporary relocation to Annamosa, presumably in Iowa, a "move" the editors refrain from exploring (259). Henry once proudly read a letter of Delia's (ca. 14 Feb. 1863) "to a lot of brother officers," who "complimented" him on Delia's "grit" in writing that "you did not care how it was ended but

you hated to be whipped” (143). Clearly gratified by her husband’s service to country, Delia likely shared some of his incoming letters with others back in Wisconsin. This detail can be inferred from a letter (1 Oct. 1863) which he cautions her to consider “a family letter,” like her “last letter,” which he refrained from showing “to any one” because she “had the blues” (194).

We learn, too, from the correspondence that relationships, marriages, and mercantile affairs were shaped not only by the war, but also by the nearly constant act of letter writing. As early as 5 March 1862, Young claimed to be writing “five or six letters every week” (56). During a brief assignment with the detached Construction Corps (25 May–16 Sept. 1862) he felt it necessary to write fellow soldiers in the regiment to keep in touch with them (72). Young received as many as twelve letters in one day (176). From clues within the letters in this volume, I deduce that Delia sent Henry at least 64 letters and Jared another 38, that is 102 in all, compared to the 155 Henry addressed to them. This 65-percent response rate may explain Young’s frequent pleas for more letters. In October 1864, he chides “Father” Warner for “[getting] me to write all the letters you can, and on your part writ[ing] as few as you can” (269) and threatens to bore Delia “with a letter with as little news in it as possible just to pay you for neglecting me” (271).

On becoming captain of Company F (5 Jan. 1863), Young assumed responsibility for writing muster rolls, final statement papers, and official reports (133). Writing about the wounded or killed in his company was painful, but Delia and Jared obviously wanted to know which local men had fallen in battle; during the Wilderness campaign, Henry took to unofficially reporting such casualties within his personal letters (229–44).

Except when he wrote on his lap or knapsack, Young was usually capable of legible handwriting. (See the facsimile of his letter of 31 Aug. 1861 [4–5].) When pen and paper were available, he was eager to write to his loved ones back home. Only once, a week before being furloughed home for the second time, did he admit to Delia, “I don’t feel like writing ...The fact is i feel homesick” (209). The epistolary skills Young acquired over the course of the war affected his way of seeing and talking about it in the years thereafter.

Larson and Smith do not bog down in the finer points of Henry Young’s development as a writer and war commentator; their careful, unobtrusive editing will help both casual and academic readers to enjoy the absorbing letters collected in *Dear Delia*.<sup>2</sup>

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2. One desideratum: maps of (a) Wisconsin, showing where the Young and Warner families lived, and (b) Young’s movements in the East while he was in service.