

Agent of Mercy: The Untold Story of Dr. Archibald S. Maxwell, Civil War Surgeon and Iowa State Sanitary Agent

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Agent of Mercy: The Untold Story of Dr. Archibald S. Maxwell, Civil War Surgeon and Iowa State Sanitary Agent, by George C. Maxwell. Create Space, 2015. 193 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, appendix, index. \$12.99 paperback.

Reviewer Kenneth L. Lyftogt recently retired as an instructor of history at the University of Northern Iowa. He is the author of several books on Iowa and the Civil War, including *From Blue Mills to Columbia: Cedar Falls and the Civil War* (2007).

Family history is often an inspiration for scholarship, especially among people who want to know about their Civil War ancestors. George Maxwell became acquainted with his great-great-great-grandfather, Dr. Archibald S. Maxwell, through an 1884 obituary that he read at a family reunion in Scott County, Iowa. The obituary provided the inspiration, and George Maxwell provided the scholarship for this book. Family stories of the Civil War are often too narrow, lacking context or insight, to interest any but family members. This book, however, is an exception. George Maxwell is a descendant who wants to recognize and honor his ancestor, but he is also a scholar of the war who deftly uses his family story to say something of value.

The book has two themes. The first concerns logistics. The Civil War was a monumental undertaking, a continental conflict fought by a nation that had never seen war on such a scale. Successful logistics resulted in huge armies fighting and campaigning across hundreds and even thousands of miles. Efficient systems were quickly developed to shelter, supply, train, transport, and march the troops to the war's battlefronts and garrison posts. The second theme concerns the often callous treatment of Civil War soldiers, specifically the treatment of the sick and wounded, an often neglected aspect of Civil War studies.

Maxwell's book is thus both triumphant and bitter. The triumph of the Civil War is its place as the last of the country's great volunteer wars. Every hometown celebrated sending its soldiers to war. The bitterness comes from the recognition that the hometown volunteers were let down by those who called them to war. The great logisticians of the war, those who successfully planned for every military need on the battlefield, failed to anticipate the vast numbers of wounded that such huge battles would inevitably produce. They should have known better, and they should have been better prepared. The hundreds of wounded from the Battle of Wilson's Creek, the first of the great battles in the West, were brought to military hospitals in St. Louis that were not ready to receive them. "The new army hospital had no beds, . . . no food, and no nurses. In short, nothing was prepared" (7).

The triumphant aspect of the book is that volunteers stepped in to care for the suffering soldiers. The wounded from Wilson's Creek were cared for, but not by a well-prepared government. "The starving soldiers were fed on the night of their arrival, but not by the Army. The people of St. Louis fed the wounded" (7). That volunteer spirit became a lifeline for the soldiers. Volunteers visited the military camps, bringing food, medicine, supplies, mail, and cheer from home. Volunteers established an efficient system of pooled resources to ship tons of hometown donations to camps across many states. Annie Turner Wittenmyer of Keokuk came to personify Iowa's volunteers. Dr. Archibald S. Maxwell, a close acquaintance of Annie Wittenmyer, was another of Iowa's remarkable volunteers.

When the war began, Maxwell was 45 years old, an established Davenport physician, a husband and father, and in poor health, all reasons to stay home and leave the war to others. Maxwell, a leading citizen of Davenport, Iowa, became convinced, however, that "the U.S. Army could not be trusted to take care of the thousands of citizens who had recently volunteered to save the Union" (7). Maxwell's service took him to sites of many of the war's greatest battles, but he saw nothing of the excitement or glamour of the battlefield; his work lay in the bloody aftermath.

Each of his many experiences in the field is a tragic and heroic Civil War story in its own right. For example, the Second Iowa Infantry won fame for its attack on Fort Donelson, where it lost 40 dead and 160 wounded. After the battle, the Iowa wounded were scattered across Northern hospitals, with their loved ones back home having no idea where or how they were. Dr. Maxwell was part of the Davenport Relief Committee sent to find the Iowa wounded. What the committee members found along the way does much to undermine Civil War romanticism. Every hospital was a charnel-house horror with wounded, sick, all-but-forgotten men suffering terribly in filth and disease.

The Civil War was a political war on every front. Every officer was a politician, from the hometown captain who aspired to higher rank to the generals who aspired to even higher positions. Every military promotion or failure to achieve promotion was a story of political intrigue and influence. It is not surprising that the care of the sick and wounded would also be sullied by political battles. The role of government was one source of difficulty. Many believed that the care of the sick and wounded should be organized on the state and national level, just as the army itself was. Many Iowans didn't buy that idea. As far as they were concerned, both state and federal governments had let them down. Community volunteers had to organize on their own, and

they did so very effectively. Much of the book concerns the conflict between those who supported efforts to centralize and professionalize the relief systems and those who saw this as usurping local volunteers who were already doing the job. The political battles, inevitably, turned personal, with vicious attacks on Annie Wittenmyer and those who supported the community-based relief organizations. Dr. Maxwell, a supporter of Wittenmyer, was in the thick of the struggle.

There is no glamour in petty Iowa politics, but it is a central part of the story of Iowa and the war, and author George Maxwell has done well to bring the issue to light. *Agent of Mercy* is well written and well documented and will be a valuable part of anyone's Civil War library, especially for those who study Iowa's role in the Civil War.

Surveillance and Spies in the Civil War: Exposing Confederate Conspiracies in America's Heartland, by Stephen E. Towne. Ohio University Press Series on Law, Society, and Politics in the Midwest. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015. xi, 430 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$90.00 hardcover, \$34.95 paperback.

Reviewer Donald C. Elder III is professor of history at Eastern New Mexico University. He is the editor of *Love Amid the Turmoil: The Civil War Letters of William and Mary Vermilion* (2003) and *A Damned Iowa Greyhound: The Civil War Letters of William Henry Harrison Clayton* (1998).

During the first year of the Spanish Civil War, a journalist questioned Nationalist General Emilio Mola about his campaign to capture Madrid. In his response, Mola noted that he had four columns approaching the city but also asserted that he had a "fifth column" of supporters inside the Spanish capital that would be aiding his effort. Since then, the term *fifth column* has been used to describe subversive activities designed to undermine the efforts of a political entity to achieve military success.

Although the term *fifth column* dates from a twentieth-century internal conflict, the concept would have been easily understood by those who were caught up in a nineteenth-century civil war—the one that involved the United States of America. As that contest raged, many residents of the Northern states became increasingly convinced that a number of their fellow citizens were actively engaged in efforts to undermine the Union war effort. To those individuals, General Mola's assertion regarding the efficacy of *sub rosa* activities would have therefore struck a responsive chord.

While widespread, the belief that a substantial number of Northerners engaged in subversive activity (often through memberships in