

Surveillance and Spies in the Civil War: Exposing Confederate Conspiracies in America's Heartland

Donald C. Elder III

Eastern New Mexico University

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2016 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Elder, Donald C. III "Surveillance and Spies in the Civil War: Exposing Confederate Conspiracies in America's Heartland." *The Annals of Iowa* 75 (2016), 175-177.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12287>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

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

groups like The Knights of the Golden Circle) has not been shared universally. Most notably, Frank Klement, for years the foremost authority on the subject of disloyalty in the North, maintained that the accusations of subversive activity were overblown or completely fabricated. For him, the fact that very few overt acts of subversion occurred served as *a priori* evidence that Northern disloyalty was usually simply verbal in nature.

Recently, however, that interpretation has come under increased scrutiny. Providing the most compelling argument to date along these lines is Stephen E. Towne. In *Surveillance and Spies in the Civil War*, Towne examines Union efforts to combat disloyal activities in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan. The book demonstrates persuasively why the conspiracy theorists were correct all along.

Towne is well qualified to examine the question of disloyal behavior in the Old Northwest. An Indiana archivist, Towne had access to materials that were either unknown to or overlooked by other investigators. While acknowledging that some records have apparently vanished, Towne asserts that what remains from that time period is sufficient to prove that conspiracies not only occurred—on a number of occasions, they actually came remarkably close to fruition.

Towne begins his book with an overview of how Union military intelligence-gathering efforts have been depicted over time and then turns his attention to how Union authorities developed and implemented strategies to deal with subversive activities in the Old Northwest. In his telling, law enforcement officers recognized early on during the conflict that there were Northern citizens who were attempting to provide aid and comfort to the Southern cause. Seeking to quell these activities, however, they found their efforts stymied by a number of factors. U.S. Attorney-General Edward Bates, for example, did not provide legal opinions to support their endeavors, and local courts often failed to convict the conspirators who were actually brought to trial.

These judicial failures proved especially frustrating for the governors of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan, who all felt that disloyal citizens in their midst represented a grave threat to the success of the Union's effort to suppress the rebellion. Obviously, this state of affairs also proved problematic for Union military authorities. Seeing no other alternative, they began a cooperative effort to deal with subversion outside of normal legal channels.

To accomplish this task, a small but effective group of operatives was authorized to infiltrate suspected disloyal groups. A mixture of soldiers and civilians, these individuals proved remarkably successful. Efforts to liberate Confederate prisoner-of-war camps, for example,

never reached the operational phase, and thousands of weapons that were intended to arm disloyal citizens never arrived at their intended destinations. Counterintelligence forces in the region therefore deserve credit for helping the federal government maintain its authority throughout the war.

Clearly, Towne has validated the assertion that disloyal elements were active in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan during the American Civil War. This, of course, raises a question: Did similar subversive behavior take place elsewhere, or did unique conditions in that region make it a phenomenon confined to those particular states? Did Iowa, for example, have its own internal struggle? One may hope that some enterprising historian will one day grace us with as thorough an examination of fifth-column activities in the Hawkeye State and elsewhere as Towne has done for the Old Northwest.

A Peculiar Imbalance: The Fall and Rise of Racial Equality in Minnesota, 1837–1869, by William D. Green. A Fesler-Lampert Minnesota Heritage Book. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007. xiii, 220 pp. Notes, index. \$22.95 paperback.

Degrees of Freedom: The Origins of Civil Rights in Minnesota, 1865–1912, by William D. Green. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. xx, 367 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$32.95 hardcover.

Reviewer John W. McKerley is oral historian with the Iowa Labor History Oral Project at the University of Iowa Labor Center and adjunct assistant professor of history at the University of Iowa. His dissertation (University of Iowa, 2008) was "Citizens and Strangers: The Politics of Race in Missouri from Slavery to the Era of Jim Crow."

We are in the midst of a renaissance of scholarship on the history of race and African American life in the nineteenth-century Midwest. Over the past decade, a growing number of scholars have expanded and revised a handful of classic texts to reveal an increasingly complex narrative of racial formation and agency on behalf of the region's people of African descent.

William D. Green makes a useful, if complicated, contribution to this scholarly flowering in his two books on African Americans in Minnesota: *A Peculiar Imbalance (PI)* and *Degrees of Freedom (DoF)*. Two aspects of the books deserve to be emphasized at the outset. First, like many state studies, the two books (and *DoF* in particular) focus less on the state as a whole than on a particular locale, in this case St. Paul, in Green's words, "the capital of black Minnesota as well as the center of white bigotry" (*DoF*, 155). Less conventional is the relationship between