



## *The Left-Armed Corps: Writings by Amputee Civil War Veterans*

by Allison M. Johnson.

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In 1865 and 1867, William Oland Bourne, a chaplain, poet, hospital volunteer, and editor of the *Soldier's Friend*, organized contests featuring essays by men who had lost their right arms in the war. Prizes as high as \$50 were awarded for literary merit and penmanship by celebrity judges—usually former or current generals. Exhibitions were held displaying the most impressive examples.

These well publicized events alerted Americans to the concept of the “empty sleeve” as an evocative symbol of the valor and sacrifices of Civil War veterans. Although only a tiny fraction of the ca. 1 million men on both sides who were wounded or maimed by combat or illness were actually amputees, their missing limbs captured the public’s attention like no other disability. Losing an arm or leg was easy to understand, unlike the more common, “invisible” debilities of chronic dysentery or rheumatism; of course, these heroes should receive pensions and occupy a special place in the pantheon of sacrificial patriots. An important thread in the recent historiography of Civil War veterans has explored the unique challenges facing disabled veterans.<sup>1</sup>

With *The Left-Armed Corps*, English professor Allison Johnson (San José State Univ.) has provided a companion volume to these studies in her own earlier work.<sup>2</sup> She has an intimate knowledge of the contemporary and historiographical literature on disabled veterans. Her long introduction provides just the right amount of information about the competitions. It (a) frames the themes that emerge in the soldiers’ writing, (b) provides a clear and succinct biography of Bourne, from whose papers the essays and much biographical information are drawn, and (c) sketches a little too briefly the contexts of veteran status.

A major purpose of the writing contests, an inescapable undercurrent of this collection, was to inspire men to demonstrate self-reliance, intelligence, and usefulness to the larger society. They would not become burdens on families or governments, but would overcome their disabilities and remain productive citizens. Moreover,

the man who has given muscle to his country must now depend more upon his brain. If he be true to himself and to society, in the relation of citizens, as he was to the country in the ranks of the army, he will develop his mental powers and resources, and if wisely done, he will, in the long run, get better paid for his brain than he did for his muscular or manual labor. (12)

Expanding on the contests’ goals, Bourne noted,

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1. See, e.g., Sarah Handley-Cousins, *Bodies in Blue: Disability and the American Civil War* (Athens: U Georgia Pr, 2019) and Shauna Devine, *Learning from the Wounded: The Civil War and the Rise of American Medical Science* (Chapel Hill: UNC Pr, 2014).

2. Viz. *The Scars We Carve: Bodies and Wounds in Civil War Print Culture* (Baton Rouge: LSU Pr, 2019).

Our purpose was to stimulate the courage, independence, self-reliance, and industry of the class of men selected.... Its "leading purpose," as the contest committee later explained, was placing before the disabled men of the country incentives to a worthy ambition to become self-reliant, and to fit themselves for positions of honor and usefulness. (12)

In choosing which of the hundreds of entries to publish, Johnson aimed to

... speak to the commonalities of the writing as an archive ... providing anecdotes of life in camp, realistically reporting the sensations of battle and the agony of wounding, asserting their loyalty to their adopted country, poeticizing loss, philosophizing, or describing their new lives. [All] add ... their voices to the literary record of the Civil War. (38)

The first half of the book details the soldiers' experience, from "Mustering and Marching" and "The Soldiering Life" to "Experiencing Battle" and "Wounding, Amputation, and Recovery." The second half draws on more intimate information: "New Americans," "The Poets," "Politics, Philosophy, and Patriotism," and "Life as One-Armed Men." Some of the essays were edited to eliminate redundancies and shorten purely factual passages unrelated to individual soldiers. Extensive but not intrusive footnotes identify individuals, battles, and medical terms. Appendices list pertinent battles and the writing contest participants with basic information about their service and wounding. The contents of the essays will be familiar to historians of the Civil War soldier experience, though the literary quality of many rises above the typical soldier's memoir. Two chapters in particular stand out.

"Wounding, Amputation, and Recovery" details battlefield wounds and hospital experiences. Though the essayists describe torturous, sometimes multiple, surgeries and setbacks like failed ligatures, infections, and indifferent care at field hospitals, only a few complain. In fact, most professed satisfaction with their honorable sacrifices and looked forward to their futures. One man, who kept his right arm but lost its use, wrote,

I am classified with the left arm department. Nor am I ashamed to acknowledge it. I am not ashamed to own the cause.... Being afflicted as I am three years and six days to day, I can with gratification to myself (and without any egotism) defy the world at large of anyone who has ever heard me complain of my misfortune. I like the Apostle Paul have striven that in whatsoever situation I am placed therewith to make myself content.... There is nothing for a wounded or sick man that is of more benefit to him than to put and keep on a bold front. (154-55)

"Life as One-Armed Men" is more personal than the other chapters, and more ambiguous as the essayists honestly lay out the struggles they faced as they transitioned into their lives as disabled men. They often question their masculinity even as while putting up a good front. In response to the apparently common suggestion that one-armed soldiers could make a living as bartenders, Jonathan Allison insists,

No. Soldiers you can fill higher and better positions in life than that, or any one similar to it. If we act as becomes soldiers or good citizens. Your misfortune and sacrifice in behalf of your country has not rendered you incapable of filling important positions in life. Your friends and country hold you doubly dear, and you have the sympathy and best wishes of all good loyal people for your success and welfare in the future. You can see already the patriotic effort on now to fit and prepare the disabled soldiers of our country for lucrative positions in [the] honorable business of life. (296)

Some might find these efforts to highlight the successful struggle of disabled men—or, rather, men with a very particular disability—a little ham-handed and even condescending. The emphasis on recovering economic and personal independence, while reflecting the Gilded Age distaste

for charity and government aid, will put off modern readers conditioned by overwhelming support for programs dedicated to the treatment and care of disabled veterans. The Civil War generation—disabled soldiers and members of their communities alike—were taught to ignore the handicaps war had inflicted and believe they could support themselves and their families. Yet participants in the left-handed writing contests “underscored their reconfigured bodies and presented the products thereof to the public” (291).

The pithy biographies Johnson provides for these men suggest they succeeded in building good and productive lives. They held rewarding jobs, joined the Grand Army of the Republic, and sometimes served in public office. That said, these were not typical disabled soldiers. They took an aggressive approach to recovery—learning to write with their left hand almost before their right arm had healed. More important, they entered the left-handed writing contests, demonstrating they were still more committed to overcoming their disability than others. Perhaps such determined men were more likely to succeed to begin with than others. That does not lessen the value of this collection, but it does reveal one of its limitations.

Another is that the thoughts of these men were captured at a particular moment in time, when their attitudes and emotions about their positions were still new to them. Most lived for many years with their disabilities, often requiring constant, painful treatment and medication. Again, that is not the fault of the sources, nor does it reduce the potency of the essays. But we must remember that these courageous and eloquent left-handed writers were at the beginning rather than the end of their long journeys through life as disabled old soldiers.

*The Left-Armed Corps* is a well conceived and edited collection of essays. Its unique insights into the lives of Civil War veterans will inspire future studies of the disabled men who for decades after Appomattox were still America’s most potent reminders of the true costs of war.