

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association  
for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)

Documentary Editing, Association for

---


9-2002

## Selling the Civil War in Art and Memoir: Review of Private Robert Knox Sneden, *Eye of the Storm: A Civil War Odyssey*, ed. Charles F. Bryan, Jr., and Nelson D. Lankford.

John David Smith

North Carolina State University, jdsmith4@uncc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit>

 Part of the [Digital Humanities Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), and the [Technical and Professional Writing Commons](#)

---

Smith, John David, "Selling the Civil War in Art and Memoir: Review of Private Robert Knox Sneden, *Eye of the Storm: A Civil War Odyssey*, ed. Charles F. Bryan, Jr., and Nelson D. Lankford." (2002). *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)*. 402.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit/402>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Documentary Editing, Association for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)* by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

# Selling the Civil War in Art and Memoir

John David Smith

Private Robert Knox Sneden, *Eye of the Storm: A Civil War Odyssey*, ed. Charles F. Bryan, Jr., and Nelson D. Lankford. New York: The Free Press, 2000. 329 pp., illus. \$37.50 (cloth), ISBN 0-684-86365-0.

Despite the economic twists and turns of scholarly publishing, presses can bank on selling Civil War documentary editions. Like books on sex and the Nazis, Civil War titles satisfy a seemingly insatiable appetite of readers both at home and abroad. This is especially true for handsomely illustrated memoirs like *Eye of the Storm: A Civil War Odyssey*, edited by Charles F. Bryan, Jr., and Nelson D. Lankford of the Virginia Historical Society. *Eye of the Storm* is an edition of watercolor images drawn by and the Civil War memoir of Robert Knox Sneden (1832–1918). Heretofore an anonymous figure, Sneden was an analytical, articulate, opinionated, and perceptive Union soldier and an extremely talented artist.

*Eye of the Storm* has received significant attention from the national media and no doubt the book graces the coffee tables of regiments of Civil War buffs. A few years ago, New York publishers tripped over themselves in a bidding war over the manuscript. It reportedly fetched a cash advance of \$355,000, a remarkable publishing event for a historical society that usually pays to have its historical works published. Sneden's colored sketches illustrate the author's

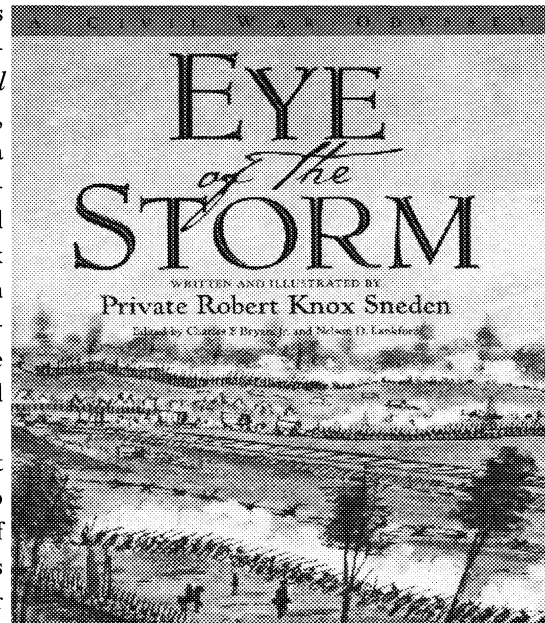
narrative and by themselves are worth the price of the book. Vivid and minutely-detailed, the plates are softened by warm hues, simple arrangements, and a flattened perspective. Sneden's art brings to mind David Greenspan's exquisite battlefield drawings in *The American Heritage Picture History of the Civil War* (1960). According to Bryan and Lankford, their edition constitutes "one of the most important Civil War documents ever produced." They extol the "incredible detail" that renders *Eye of the Storm* "perhaps the most complete

description of Civil War battlefield experience and prison life ever written" (p. ix).

Notwithstanding the editors' exaggerated sense of the importance and originality of their text, Civil War buffs and serious historians will find *Eye of the Storm* rife with insightful first-hand military and social observations. In his memoir, Sneden described the day-to-day life of ordinary Yankee soldiers with precision and restraint. He wrote about such mundane matters as alcohol consumption, card playing, exploding shells, flies, hard and soft tack, land mines, military balloons, music, railroad guns, snuff, and quinine. Sneden

described such diverse individuals as barbers, bushwhackers, drummers, officers, surgeons, sailor prisoners, sutlers, telegraph operators, and teamsters. Seemingly apolitical, he made few direct references to destroying slavery or to maintaining the Union. Sneden reserved his strongest language for the jailors who guarded him and thousands of fellow Union prisoners of war at several Confederate prisons.

*Eye of the Storm* consists of eighty-three illustrations and 192 chronologically arranged "diary/memoir" entries covering the period 29 September 1861 to 26 December 1864. In their preface, Bryan and Lankford explain the murky provenance of Sneden's approximately 800 Civil War-era watercolor drawings, maps, and pen-and-ink sketches and his



Book Cover

---

John David Smith is Graduate Alumni Distinguished Professor of History and director of the M.A. in Public History Program at North Carolina State University. His many books include the eleven-volume documentary *Anti-Black Thought, 1860–1925: "The Negro Problem"* (1993), which received The Gustavus Myers Center Award for the Study of Human Rights in North America, and *Black Soldiers in Blue: African American Troops in the Civil War Era* (2002).

mammoth five-volume illustrated “diary/memoir,” acquired recently by the Virginia Historical Society. Like many other Civil War soldier-artists, during the war Sneden made primitive pencil or pen sketches and later refined and colored the images with hopes of publishing them. Sneden also kept a series of diaries, including a secret shorthand journal during his incarceration at Andersonville prison, again with the intent of publishing the texts after the war. *Eye of the Storm* includes roughly one-tenth of Sneden’s watercolors and less than one-third of his holograph “diary/memoir.”

Before his capture and imprisonment, Sneden periodically mailed his sketches and diary entries back home. While in prison he protected the drawings and diaries by sewing them into his clothing and stashing them in his shoes. “Paper was very scarce with us at all times,” he noted soon after his capture. “I had marked and written all over every scrap which I possessed, and was lucky to get a small though thick memorandum book from a newcomer with only a few pages written on in pencil. This I cleaned off with corn bread crumbs and made new entries of my diary from the scraps. I made in it plans of Rebel forts, etc., which I had passed, and most of the writing was in short hand, which no Rebel could ever decipher. I used an alphabet of numbers also which was intelligible only to myself” (pp. 170–71).

Though Sneden never published his diary or the corpus of his sketches, illustrations based on his drawings appeared after the war in *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Magazine*, *Century Magazine*, and *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* (1887–1888). According to Bryan and Lankford, Sneden’s sketches chronicled his Civil War travails and travels “as though he had a video recorder and kept it running throughout the war” (p. ix). Because his original diaries have not survived, the editors were forced to excerpt and annotate from Sneden’s postwar memoir, which they assumed to be based closely on his wartime texts. They realized that to enhance the attractiveness of his memoir to potential publishers, Sneden no doubt added details from published sources following Appomattox. Bryan and Lankford have carefully excised this material from their edition.

Unfortunately, *Eye of the Storm* is seriously under documented. The editors provide only a handful of annotations to explicate or expand upon Sneden’s text. Most identify individuals, clarify points, or correct minor errors of fact or chronology Sneden committed as he edited and expanded his diaries for possible publication in the postwar decades. Regrettably, none of the annotations contain bibliographical references. Perhaps the sparse documentation stems from the editors’ hope to market their book to a broad, non-scholarly audience. All readers though would welcome a list of the book’s many illustrations, an amenity that the editors omit

from their front matter. On a positive note, Bryan and Lankford provide an editorial statement explaining their decision to modernize Sneden’s text that is both a model for its rationale and for its clarity. Editorial statements belong near the front of an edition, however, not following the bibliography as Bryan and Lankford position theirs.

In their undocumented prologue and epilogue and in their note on sources, Bryan and Lankford admit having unearthed pitifully little biographical information on the Canadian-born Sneden, a self-described “Blue-nose’ from Nova Scotia” (p. 266). Most of what the editors know about him in fact comes from Sneden’s Civil War narrative and from his pension and military service records at the National Archives. Sneden’s life was “shrouded in mystery,” Bryan and Lankford explain, but they assert nevertheless that “the Civil War was the most important event of his life, and details of those years were burned in his memory” (pp. xi, ix). They apparently base this supposition on the fact that Sneden spent decades expanding and revising his diaries into a memoir.

Years before, in 1850, Sneden and his parents had moved from Canada to New York City where he worked as an architect and engineer and painted Hudson River landscapes. According to the editors, who fail to contextualize or place Sneden’s artwork within a genre or aesthetic group, his early paintings “reflect more the hand of an architectural draftsman than a formally schooled artist” (p. xi). Following the surrender of Fort Sumter to the Confederates, Sneden joined the 40th New York (dubbed the “Mozart Regiment” to honor New York City’s Mozart Hall Democratic party faction). Though enlisted as a private in Company E, Sneden, who apparently had influential friends, was assigned at first to the quartermaster’s department at both the regimental and brigade levels. This relatively privileged appointment provided Sneden, who possessed a “curious eye for his environment,” freedom to record his detailed observations of men, measures, places, and events in diaries and sketches (p. 1).

After Sneden joined the 40th New York in northern Virginia, commanders of the Army of the Potomac noted his artistic talents and put him to work surveying and making detailed military drawings, maps, and plans. Though a private, he spent the first two years of the war laboring as a topographical engineer for the Third Army Corps, enjoying many of the perquisites of a commissioned staff officer at headquarters. As a mapmaker for his corps commander, Sneden also had an unusual vantage point from which to observe—with sketchbook in hand—numerous engagements, including the Peninsula campaign, the Seven Days’ battles, and the Second Bull Run.

In November 1863, while mapping terrain near Brandy

Station, Virginia, Sneden's good fortune ended. Confederate partisan rangers dressed in Federal uniforms under the command of Colonel John Singleton Mosby captured him. When he refused to divulge information, one of Mosby's men pistol-whipped Sneden. The Rebels next incarcerated Sneden at Richmond's Crew and Pemberton tobacco factory. On Christmas Day 1863 he recorded in his diary the harsh circumstances the northern captives experienced. "Many prisoners are now in rags, and have to lie on the bare floor shivering with cold all night, unable to sleep at all .... We have yet five or six cases of small pox among us. These poor fellows ... walk up and down, ragged, shoeless and crawling with vermin!" (p. 175). Sneden contracted typhoid fever and almost died.

Circumstances improved little for Sneden in February 1864 when the Confederates transferred him from Richmond to their new stockade at Andersonville, Georgia. Bryan and Lankford explain that life at Andersonville quickly "descended into a Hobbesian cesspit of brutality against the weakest" (p. 228). Sneden's detailed descriptions of the horrendous conditions at Andersonville—callous treatment by guards, teeming disease, insufficient rations, severe overcrowding, and countless deaths—support the editors' assertion that *Eye of the Storm* provides invaluable documentation on the woeful conditions in Confederate prisons.

Describing, for example, the vermin that populated Andersonville, Sneden wrote: "The flies are now here in millions. Everything is covered with them, dense swarms like a cloud settle on the pile of dead which are daily seen near the gates. The ground in the thickest part settled in the camp is alive and moves with maggots or lice! The filthy swamp undulates like small waves with them, while the insufferable stench nearly takes away one's breath!" (pp. 229–30). In a later entry, Sneden remarked: "The mosquitoes came down on us again tonight ... only more of them, and no rest was had by thousands who were about until daylight fighting them off. I noticed that they did not alight on the sick and dying men who lay around" (p. 255).

Though generally unsympathetic to African-Americans, Sneden acknowledged that slaves performed "all the hardest work of course" at Andersonville. "They often get lashed by their masters or overseers," he wrote, "as we can hear their cries of pain plainly over at the log house village at Andersonville on still nights." Sneden went on to explain that, "When the Rebels capture a Negro soldier, if he is already wounded they either shoot him instantly [or] if not badly wounded they capture him so that he may work for them when he recovers. All the others have to work, on fortifications, felling trees, making roads, etc. ..." (p. 213).

Men of the 8th U.S. Colored Troops, captured at the 20

February 1864 battle of Olustee, Florida, suffered conspicuously at the hands of the Rebels. "Nearly all are minus an arm or leg," Sneden wrote, "and their wounds are yet unhealed. Many of them are gangrened and they will all surely die. They keep by themselves and are very quiet. The Rebels have removed every vestige of any uniform they once wore, and they have nothing on but old cast off jean trousers and cotton shorts. All are bareheaded, barefooted, and as thin as skeletons. Those captured who were able to work are kept at work outside by the Rebels, felling trees, making roads, etc. etc. The white officers who were captured with them have been all put in the dungeons of Libby and Castle Thunder at Richmond, and are made to eat and sleep with Negroes ..." (p. 225).

In September 1864 Confederates moved Sneden and other Union prisoners of war to less crowded and more sanitary prison pens in Savannah and Millen, Georgia. Two months later, Sneden accepted parole and contracted to serve as a clerk for a Confederate surgeon. Suddenly the day-to-day conditions of Sneden's life improved dramatically. In December 1864 after he finally was exchanged for a Confederate prisoner of war, Sneden made his way north to Brooklyn to join his family, he explained, "who had long given me up for dead" (p. 298). Sneden arrived home the day after Christmas.

Though Sneden never lived to see his Civil War art and memoir published, he once remarked that "I leave no posterity, but a good WAR RECORD" (p. 306). In *Eye of the Storm*, Bryan and Lankford have ensured that Sneden's "good war record" will be viewed and read profitably by a large and appreciative audience.

