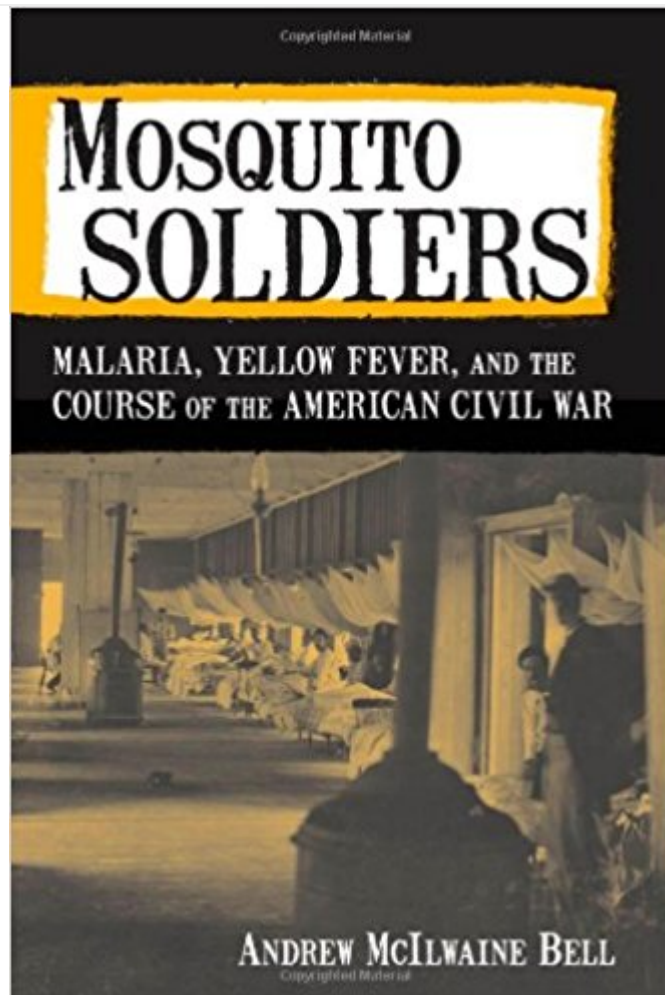


{essays in history}

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Mosquito Soldiers: Malaria, Yellow Fever, and the Course of the American Civil War



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Mosquito Soldiers: Malaria, Yellow Fever, and the Course of the American Civil War. By Andrew McIlwaine Bell (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010). Pp. xvi + 192. Cloth, \$29.95.

With this thin but well-researched volume, Andrew McIlwaine Bell has accomplished an impressive feat: an interesting, original discussion of two diseases and their consequences for the American Civil War. It is a well-known fact that diseases typically take more lives in war than do bullets and bombs. Perhaps many students of the Civil War know, as Bell points out, that far more soldiers—both Union and Confederate—died from illness rather than from wounds inflicted by the enemy. And yet, despite this knowledge, the vast majority of scholarship on military aspects of the Civil War has been devoted to strategies, tactics, and battles. Thus, Bell's intervention in the vast historical literature on the Civil War intends to demonstrate that mosquitoes and the diseases they spread—to soldier and civilian, to Johnny Reb and Billy Yank—profoundly affected the path of the war.

In seven concise chapters that progress from the mid-nineteenth century to the end of the Civil War, Bell develops a persuasive central argument. Long before the war between the states broke out, both northern and southern Americans feared the malaria and yellow fever that came every year with the “sickly season” of summer and fall—especially along the coasts and in the wetlands of the South. Once the war broke out, shattered infrastructure, the close quartering of men, and compromised sanitary conditions only extended the reach of the disease. Nearly every element of the life of the soldier for the duration of the Civil War faced complications owing to the maladies that mosquitoes transmitted; the sheer numbers of infection, illustrated in two useful appendices, are striking. Indeed, Bell convincingly shows these complications, and often the fears that they bred, had a profound impact on the course of the war.

Interestingly, leadership in the North and South found seasonal diseases to be not only another enemy but also a potential weapon added to their arsenals. For the first two years of the war, actors on both sides of the

conflict developed strategies and tactics that related directly to malaria and yellow fever. Southerners banked on the hope that yellow fever would save cities such as New Orleans from the northern interloper. Near the end of the war, as the Confederate cause was on the verge of collapse, southern political leaders even launched a covert biological warfare-style yellow fever attack on Washington, D.C. Though ill-conceived and ultimately failed, the scheme to sell what Confederate agents believed was a trunk full of yellow fever-infected garments betrayed continued attempts on the part of southerners to employ pathogens on behalf of their war effort (103-110). Confederate military leadership, somewhat more effectively, sent extra troops from parts of the Deep South to bulwark vulnerable areas, such as Richmond, confident in the knowledge that the Union's operations farther south would be significantly scaled back in the sickly season. Union officers leading campaigns in the Deep and coastal South in the early stages of the war often hesitated to launch full assaults on significant Confederate targets in the late-summer and autumn months precisely because they feared exposing their charges to malaria or yellow fever or because their forces, suffering from fevers, vomiting, and fatigue, were at far less than full strength. Thus, well into 1863, the Confederate Army, though it was certainly not immune to malaria and yellow fever and faced a supposedly superior Union foe, remained solidly in the fight largely because of the help it had received from innumerable mosquito soldiers (55-77).

The tide of the war turned in favor of the Union only when Ulysses S. Grant, somehow undeterred by the scourge of malaria and yellow fever, decided to rush his army past Confederate guns at Vicksburg in the midst of the sickly season in Mississippi armed, most notably, with huge stocks of the malaria-fighting drug, quinine. Along with the continued blockade of southern ports, the division of the South along the Mississippi River following Grant's siege severely curtailed the Confederacy's ability to supply its soldiers and civilians with clothing, food, and, most importantly for Bell's purposes, medical supplies. After Vicksburg fell—and the mosquito mercenaries turned on their southern hosts in large numbers—it would only be a matter of time before the Confederacy lost the ability and willpower to continue fighting for its independence (77-87).

Even if the factors behind battle outcomes of the first two years of the Civil War differ from those in more conventional narratives, the route that the war took does not look very different in this book. To be sure, Bell does not aim to argue that mosquito soldiers were *the* determining factor in the final result of the Civil War. What he does intend to do, however, is demonstrate that mosquitoes, malaria, and yellow fever had a heretofore unappreciated effect on the war; this goal he achieves successfully. Related to that aim, Bell also claims this study is significant because it adds the insights of the history of medicine and environmental history to our understanding of the Civil War (6-8). Curiously, these are areas where Bell's book falls somewhat short. Undoubtedly, the impressive amount and array of primary materials that Bell brings together for this study provide the basis upon which to clearly assert his contribution to Civil War historiography, as well as to that of the history of medicine and environmental history. Yet, the historical literature on the Civil War is almost completely excluded from the text. There is, moreover, very little engagement in the text, or in the notes, with historiographical debates from the history of medicine. Such an omission is particularly odd considering that Bell is a historian of medicine and that the book begins on defensive note about "modern science," "presentism," "truths that transcend time and cultural traditions," and the history of medicine in general (xi). Similarly, though the book ably demonstrates the ways in which humans manipulated the non-human world with the aim of defeating the enemy, the author declines to discuss any of the currents in environmental historiography or even list any works of environmental history in his bibliography.^[1]

These qualms aside, this book does present a novel and provocative approach to the Civil War. Instructors will find *Mosquito Soldiers* an interesting counter-point to traditional interpretations of the path of war within an American history course, a welcome addition to a seminar on new military history, and perhaps an interesting invitation to new research questions in both upper-level undergraduate courses and graduate seminars.

Casey P. Cater

Georgia State University

[1] Environmental historians are increasingly interested in the intersection of the human and non-human worlds in the context of war. Among those that consider the American Civil War, see Lisa Brady, “The Wilderness of War: Nature and Strategy in the American Civil War.” *Journal of American History* 83 (1996): 13-43; and Jack Temple Kirby, “The American Civil War: An Environmental View,” National Humanities Center website, <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/nattrans/ntuseland/essays/amcwar.htm>.



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