
Citizen journalism has been around a long time, long before the historic YouTube videos and Tweets of the Arab Spring. During the American Civil War, the nation’s newspapers relied heavily on the public to supply the press with first-hand accounts of the war. Soldiers and citizens submitted letters and telegraphs for publication, which often provided the most detailed and immediate reports available. Additionally, the Southern press lagged behind its Northern counterpart in employing professional war correspondents to record the war, making citizen journalists all that much more critical to the flow of news in the South. *Confederate Incognito: The Civil War Reports of “Long Grabs,” a.k.a. Murdoch John McSween, 26th and 35th North Carolina Infantry*, edited by E. B. Munson, chronicles the wartime exploits of one such Southern nonprofessional correspondent, through a collection of more than eighty letters that were published in the *Fayetteville Observer*.

Little is known about the man who wrote under the odd pseudonym “Long Grabs.” Munson links “Long Grabs” to real-life Murdoch John McSween, an on-again-off-again drill instructor at Camp Mangum, in Raleigh, who seemed to prefer roving around North Carolina and Virginia documenting camp life to actual military service. The anonymity in writing as “Long Grabs,” afforded McSween the freedom to present unvarnished observations in his dispatches. He wrote with candor, often even commenting on the personal lives of major Confederate figures. For example, in a letter published March 12, 1863, Long Grabs described Jefferson Davis’s son as a “spoiled chicken,” a rambunctious child who, “can use more profanity, turn over more furniture, torment more cats, and invent more scenes of devilment, than all the little boys within his father’s jurisdiction.”

The letters include many unexpected passages, such as a description, in May 1862, of a performance by “Blind Tom,” a famous nineteenth-century African American musical savant; or the mention in October 1862 of the “lunatic asylum” at Raleigh’s Dorothea Dix Hospital (“a library is much needed, and there should be gardens, fields, woods . . . This would no doubt tend to palliate and remove mental derangements”); or the January 1863 allegations that Union soldiers occupying Norfolk, Virginia were accepting bribes to return emancipated slaves into Southern bondage.

McSween’s personal story had its twists and turns. In 1863, McSween became embroiled in a dispute with Colonel Matt Ransom, of the 35th North Carolina, and was ultimately court-martialed and sentenced to twelve months of hard labor. Upon his release, “Long Grabs” enlisted in the 26th North Carolina and was wounded twice at the Battle of Petersburg. Following the war, McSween parlayed his reporting experience into a career as a publisher of another newspaper, the Fayetteville *Eagle* (1868-1875).
Editor E. B. Munson, who is a librarian at East Carolina University, provides a valuable layer of analysis and contextual information to the original letters. Munson’s chapter notes, footnotes, index, and bibliography should provide many potential hooks for readers, especially genealogists or those researching relatively obscure topics from North Carolina’s Civil War experience. *Confederate Incognito* would be a useful addition to any library collection with a focus on state and local history or for institutions with an interest in the history of journalism.

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