

# IN THIS ISSUE

---



## BOOK REVIEWS

---

GEORGE S. MAHARY, *Vermont Hero: Major General Lewis A. Grant*. Jeffrey D. Marshall 141

FRED RUHLMAN, *Captain Henry Wirz and Andersonville Prison: A Reappraisal*. Charles S. Martin 143

DWIGHT A. WHITE, *The Down of the Thistle—20th Century Ryegate VT:  
A Sequel to the History of Ryegate, Vermont By Edward Miller and  
Frederic Wells* Allen R. Yale 146

PATRICIA W. BELDING, *One Less Woman.* Thomas Davis 147

MARGARET O. KILLINGER, *The Good Life of Helen K. Nearing.*  
Annie Dunn Watson 150

# BOOK REVIEWS

---



---

## *Vermont Hero: Major General Lewis A. Grant*

---

By George S. Mahary (Lincoln, Neb.: iUniverse, 2006, pp. xviii, 317, \$32.95; paper, \$22.95).

---

Vermont's role in the Civil War has inspired a seemingly endless stream of books and articles in recent years. New regimental histories, accounts of campaigns and home-front activities, memoirs, and biographies have contributed to a growing but uneven body of literature. George S. Mahary's biography of General Lewis A. Grant, *Vermont Hero: Major General Lewis A. Grant*, aims to fill a gap in the historical record by documenting the life of an important but largely unheralded Vermont military leader.

Lewis Addison Grant was one of a handful of Vermonters commissioned as field officers in Vermont volunteer regiments during the Civil War without any previous military experience. Named major of the Fifth Vermont Volunteer Infantry by Governor Fairbanks in August 1861, Grant undertook the enormous work of organizing and training the regiment while its two top officers were absent for an unusual length of time. For guidance he had little but the published army regulations, infantry manuals, and the general orders issued by Vermont's adjutant and inspector generals. These he clearly studied with great devotion; throughout his career he was known as a "by the book" officer. The soldiers called him "Aunt Liddy" because of his prissy insistence on following the rules. But his hard work contributed to Grant's promotion to colonel of the Fifth Vermont, and eventually to brigadier general in command of the Vermont Brigade.

Mahary does a good job of narrating the activities of the Vermont Brigade, from the beginning of the Peninsula Campaign in the spring of

*Vermont History* Vol. 75, No. 2 (Summer/Fall 2007): 141–152.

© 2007 by the Vermont Historical Society. ISSN: 0042-4161; on-line ISSN: 1544-3043

1862 to the final siege of Petersburg three years later. Without a doubt, the Vermonters proved themselves among the best fighting troops in the Union army, and they could not have achieved such a reputation without the competent, disciplined leadership that Lewis Grant provided. Grant was less successful, or perhaps less interested, in drawing attention to himself. True to the Vermont stereotype, he was not given to bluster or exaggeration, but did his work quietly and expected no more than was due.

However he regarded himself, Grant was not without his flaws. His biggest blunder undoubtedly came in the battle of Savage's Station, an event that Mahary recounts in detail but perhaps less critically than he should. Late in June 1862, Union Major General George McClellan had begun his retreat from the outskirts of Richmond with the Vermont Brigade serving in the rear guard. On June 29 (not in July, as Mahary states), the brigade was called upon to attack advancing Confederates at Savage's Station. Grant, commanding the Fifth Vermont, ordered his men forward to a position that left them dangerously exposed to the enemy's muskets and artillery. The result was a small-scale massacre, the worst rate of casualties suffered in a single battle by any Vermont regiment. Grant escaped official criticism; the war was young and inexperience cost many lives on both sides. Nevertheless, Grant deserves some blame for the incident, and Mahary might have stated more explicitly how it contributed to his growth as a military tactician.

The lack of research materials on Lewis Grant's personal life posed a difficult problem for his biographer. Grant left very little of his own correspondence to posterity, and it is difficult to know what was truly going on in his heart and mind. Mahary writes that Grant's first wife died in 1859, leaving him with an infant daughter. The next thing we know, he has volunteered for service, and we learn nothing more about his daughter. "He dropped everything, left his home, his family, and his business," Mahary writes, "and offered his services to the governor" (pp. 2-3). Such extraordinary personal sacrifices are startling reminders of the depth of feeling that motivated Americans during the Civil War.

Mahary drew upon *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, published accounts by George Grenville Benedict and others, and numerous collections of letters and diaries for information about Lewis Grant's activities, philosophy, and perspectives on the war. Mahary cites only seventeen manuscript letters and five telegrams to and from Grant during the war, presumably all of them strictly official.

*Vermont Hero: Major General Lewis A. Grant* is a follow-up to Mahary's earlier biography, *Vermont Hero: Major General George J. Stan-*

*nard* (Shippensburg, Pa.: White Mane, 2001). Both biographies attempt to shed light on important Civil War figures who merit greater attention, and both efforts are hampered by a lack of documentary evidence. The story of the Vermont Brigade and its taciturn leader is so compelling, however, that Civil War aficionados will find *Vermont Hero* an entertaining and enlightening read.

JEFFREY D. MARSHALL

*Jeffrey D. Marshall is Director of Research Collections in the Bailey/Howe Library, University of Vermont. He is the editor of A War of the People: Vermont Civil War Letters (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999).*

---

## *Captain Henry Wirz and Andersonville Prison: A Reappraisal*

---

By R. Fred Ruhlman (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2006, pp. xvi, 270, \$34.95).

---

On June 23, 1864, 381 enlisted members of the First Vermont Brigade were taken prisoner in an unsuccessful attempt by General Ulysses S. Grant to sever the Weldon Railroad supply line of the Army of Northern Virginia that was defending the Confederate capital at Richmond. Of that number, only 157 survived to see the end of the Civil War. Half of the 224 dead are buried in marked graves at Camp Sumter near Andersonville, Georgia. The rest are scattered in graves that are either unmarked or near other prisoner of war camps—one of the consequences of the transfer of Camp Sumter’s prison population that began in August 1864. That month Union General William T. Sherman was advancing deeper into Georgia, threatening to free the Andersonville prisoners, and a scathing report was issued by the Confederate adjutant general’s office that concluded “the condition of the prison at Andersonville is a reproach to us as a nation” (p. 130).

On November 10, 1865, Captain Henry Wirz, commander of the prison stockade at Andersonville, was publicly “hanged by the neck till . . . dead” (p. 239), after a military commission convicted him of conspiring with other high-ranking Confederates to “destroy the lives, by subjecting to torture and great suffering by confining in unhealthy and unwholesome quarters, by exposing to the inclemency of winter and to the dews and burning suns of summer, by compelling the use of impure water, and by furnishing insufficient and unwholesome food, of large numbers of fed-

eral prisoners” (p. 235). Former FBI Special Agent and current University of Tennessee Adjunct Professor R. Fred Ruhlman, in his contribution to the debate over the blame for the deaths of almost 13,000 prisoners of war at Andersonville, takes issue with the guilt of Captain Wirz and maintains that justice was not served at his trial.

Ruhlman begins his attempt at exonerating Captain Wirz by recounting the breakdown of the 1862 prisoner parole and exchange agreement between the North and the South that allowed captured enemy soldiers to remain behind their own lines under “parole”—not taking up arms until an equal number of captured and paroled enemy soldiers were “exchanged.” However, by the fall of 1863, President Lincoln’s Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, prohibited further paroles and exchanges of prisoners. His action followed two dubious announcements by Confederate authorities regarding prisoner exchanges. First, in retaliation for the Emancipation Proclamation, captured “colored” Union troops were not subject to parole and exchange but would be treated as fugitive slaves, and the white officers who led them were subject to execution for “inciting servile insurrection” (p. 29). Second, soldiers among the 30,000 Confederates captured and paroled at Vicksburg by Union forces were announced to be “exchanged” and again placed under arms. That action was justified by the unsupported assertion that there were “more valid paroles of [Union] officers and men than would be equivalent for the personnel [paroled at Vicksburg] declared exchanged” (p. 31).

Since the deteriorating Confederacy had shrinking resources to provide for its own soldiers, much less for prisoners of war, Ruhlman argues that Captain Wirz found himself in a situation beyond his control, and details the logistical nightmare resulting from attempting to guard and supply over 30,000 prisoners of war in a camp designed to hold no more than 10,000. He seeks to shift blame to Wirz’s superior, General John H. Winder, the overall commander at Andersonville, who conveniently died of a stroke in February 1865. He also accuses Wirz’s accusers of maintaining a prison camp comparable to Andersonville at Elmira, New York, that justifiably earned the *nom de guerre* “Hellmira,” with a death rate as high as 24 percent of Confederate prisoners, compared to 32 percent at Andersonville.

Additionally, Ruhlman points to some possible irregularities during Captain Wirz’s trial to call its fairness into question. Aside from punishing Wirz for the sins of the entire Confederacy in maintaining the prison at Andersonville, the military commission that tried the Confederate captain provided no less due process than the tribunals proposed by the Bush Administration for trying suspected terrorists. The former FBI special agent, with more than a fleeting knowledge of the criminal justice

system, takes issue with a host of discretionary rulings by the commission that are rarely grounds for reversal of criminal convictions in civilian courts. Appellate courts repeatedly remind us that a criminal defendant is entitled to a fair trial, not a perfect one.

The flaws in Ruhlman's work are not limited to his Nuremburg-rejected "simply doing his duty" and "the North was just as bad" defenses. He also neglects to include in his mini-biography the two most important accomplishments of the president of the military commission that sat in judgment of Captain Wirz. General Lew Wallace, whom Ruhlman labels as militarily incompetent, successfully delayed, with inferior forces, an entire Confederate army at Monocacy, Maryland, preventing the capture of Washington, D.C., in July 1864, and authored *Ben-Hur* after the war. Stylistically, the transitions from one chapter to the next tend to be a bit repetitive. However, the major flaw in Ruhlman's defense of Captain Wirz is his failure to respond to accusations of criminal negligence such as those contained in retired Vermont Doctor David F. Cross's 2003 work, *A Melancholy Affair at the Weldon Railroad: The Vermont Brigade, June 23, 1864*.

Dr. Cross noted that the scurvy that took most of the lives of the prisoners at Andersonville was treatable by ascorbic acid easily obtainable from the bark and growing tips of pine trees surrounding the prison stockade. As Captain Wirz apprenticed for and became a medical doctor before the war, it is inconceivable that his medical training would not have included this remedy well known to both North American Indians and eighteenth-century soldiers and sailors. Furthermore, since the Confederate soldiers detailed to guard the stockade, who supposedly were provided the same rations as the prisoners, suffered mostly from typhoid, not scurvy, and died at a rate less than half that of the prisoners, one is tempted to look at the malnutrition of the prisoners as a means of maintaining control of a population ten times the size of the undisciplined Confederate soldiers guarding combat-experienced prisoners of war.

Although I disagree with many of the opinions that Ruhlman expresses in his defense of Captain Wirz, I must agree with his ultimate conclusion that Wirz's conviction and execution were indeed driven by the need to seek revenge for those who died at Andersonville rather than a search for justice. My own opinion is that Captain Wirz was guilty beyond a reasonable doubt of criminally negligent manslaughter, not conspiracy to commit premeditated murder, certainly not punishable by a photographed public hanging, with spectators jeering as the trap door was sprung.

CHARLES S. MARTIN

*Charles S. Martin is a Barre attorney and a trustee of the Eighteenth Vermont Regiment, Inc., Volunteers for Historic Preservation.*

---

*The Down of the Thistle—20th Century Ryegate  
VT: A Sequel to the History of Ryegate, Vermont  
By Edward Miller and Frederic Wells*

---

By Dwight A. White, (Ryegate, Vt.: Town of Ryegate, 2006, pp. vii, 245, \$30.00).

---

Dwight A. White's *The Down of the Thistle—20th Century Ryegate VT* is, as the subtitle states, a sequel to the 1913 *History of Ryegate*. This new work has several features that recommend it as a model local historians might consider when writing town histories. Most importantly, it suggests the value of updating town histories. The Ryegate selectboard feared that if "20th-century history was not recorded within the living memory of its older citizens much of it would be forever lost" (preface).

While the title brings to mind a phrase in Clement Moore's "The Night Before Christmas," it refers to the floral symbol of Scotland. Ryegate's Scottish heritage gives it the unique claim in Vermont history as the only settlement founded by a Scottish colonization company. The volume opens with a twelve-page recapitulation of the early Scottish founding. This heritage is vividly illustrated in the area of religion. All of the five churches in Ryegate in the twentieth century were Presbyterian. Members of other denominations were served by churches in neighboring towns. While the Scottish influence is still great, White acknowledges that the down of the thistle has been "cross pollinated by later cultural downs," notably the many Italian families who came to town in the late nineteenth century to work in the granite industry (preface).

*The Down of the Thistle* is thorough and organized. It is clear that the author developed an outline of subjects he wished to cover prior to or during his research. Each of the many topics, such as town politics, business, education, religions, social organizations, transportation, and utilities has a chapter. Other topics include disasters, war, community service, social life, the Great Depression, health care, and celebrations. White's work also includes sixteen pages of mini-biographies of selected individuals. He even has a chapter entitled "Anecdotes and other matters" for materials "which find no logical place in the outline of this book" (p. 213). The volume is well illustrated with over 220 photographs. White's thoroughness is demonstrated by the inclusion of a bibliography of sources and an index.

*The Down of the Thistle* is filled with lists: population, town officers, superintendents of schools, ministers, presidents of the Women's Club,



Grange masters and secretaries, road commissioners, war veterans, etc. At first the reviewer thought these lists better belonged in appendices, but on second thought, they are best juxtaposed in the appropriate chapter. While the general reader will ignore or skim over these lists, White did an invaluable service for the community by researching and preserving this important information.

Town histories are primarily intended for local people. The details—so appealing to town residents—are less meaningful to the general reader. But local historians should keep the general reader in mind when publishing a town history. For instance, White mentions several villages and regions within the town: Ryegate Corner, East Ryegate, and South Ryegate. He also mentions villages in neighboring towns, as some Ryegate residents were closer to these settlements and often went there for shopping, church, or school. These include Mosquitoville and McIndoe Falls in Barnet, and Boltonville and Wells River in Newbury. A map of the town and environs would have been helpful to readers unfamiliar with Ryegate.

One pitfall for many local histories is referring to a location by the name of the current residence or business, or even worse, by a previous occupant. While White occasionally does this, he helps strangers, newcomers, and future generations locate sites by frequently giving the “911” address. While the 911 system could be changed in the future, it should be possible for future readers to find reference to the 911 system as it existed in 2006. Again, a map including street names and geographic features would have been helpful.

*The Down on the Thistle* is testament to what can be accomplished by a dedicated local historian. It is an invaluable resource for those individuals interested in the twentieth century history of Ryegate.

ALLEN R. YALE

*Allen R. Yale is retired associate professor of history from Lyndon State College.*

---

## *One Less Woman*

---

By Patricia W. Belding (Barre, Vt.: Potash Brook Publishing, 2006, pp. 184, \$16.95).

---

**P**at Belding has hit the mark with her intriguing account of the lurid 1919 murder of Lucina Broadwell and the trial that followed. The

story of the Broadwell murder has been told many times in detective magazines and Sunday supplements, sometimes with some accuracy and other times seemingly not. Belding's *One Less Woman* trumps them all. She does so by using as a primary source the day-by-day account of the trial published by *The Barre Daily Times*, the local newspaper serving Barre at the time.

This book is extraordinary. Transporting readers back to 1919, Belding unveils a portrait of life in Barre almost a century ago. The wonderful description of what apparently was Barre's underclass and how they lived in this small industrial New England town provides local historians with a new way of looking at the era.

When I began reading *One Less Woman* I worried that I might not enjoy it because I already knew who was thought to have committed the murder. But after a very few pages I forgot all about that. Belding does a masterful job of describing the comings and goings of numerous characters in the book. Several characters appear in the story who might have opportunity and perhaps motive to commit the crime. It seems they are passed over rather quickly. Too quickly? One wonders.

Before I go any further, in the interest of full disclosure, I need to reveal that the local state's attorney who led the prosecution of the 1919 murder was Earle (ER) Davis, who happens to have been my grandfather.

George Long is charged with the crime. A sometime drifter from Maine, he was employed in the Barre area at the time the murder was committed. Did he commit this violent crime? Murders are usually committed by someone who has opportunity, means, and motive. Long had the opportunity, and the prosecution relied heavily on this in building the case. He also had the means.

But I can't find a motive. He clearly liked the ladies and liked sex. But I never got a sense from the account of the trial that it was affection, love, or an enduring relationship that George would kill for. There were far too many fish in the sea for this drifter. He was not a guy you'd bring home to Mom, but . . . ?

The story of Barre's night life and how some people lived in the year 1919 will prove as fascinating to local historians and others as the story of the murder itself.

For example, from the corner of Central Street, running north up Summer Street, a hundred rooms or more provided housing for local citizens and drifters alike. It is eye-opening to see how many people lived not in a single apartment, but in a single room. From Belding's account of the trial, we discover that people spent much of their time on the street, visiting others in their rooms, or visiting barrooms—one wonders what happened after prohibition kicked in! If the nineteen twenties were

wild, what was going on in Barre in the nineteen teens was one whale of a head start!

A description of the activities of some of the witnesses reveals that on a typical Saturday night three dances were underway in downtown Barre. Several local barrooms remained open until midnight and beyond. Were these dances frequented by only the so-called “underclass” mentioned above? Or were the dances mainstream entertainment for Barre citizens in general?

The book creates a mood generated by the ebb and flow of the characters that to me is reminiscent of the movie *Chinatown*. Life on the streets of Barre becomes a fascinating backdrop to the curious story of the murder itself.

The town’s reaction to the murder and the discovery of prostitution under their noses raises further questions. Actually, prostitution is a word that doesn’t entirely work for what seems to be a pattern for some Barre citizens. One gets the sense of a kind of sexual license that is the very opposite of what I thought might have been the standard for the time. Reading the book provoked many questions concerning how people lived and behaved (or didn’t) at the time. It would be interesting to delve deeper into attitudes and accounts of what was really going on. Downtown Barre after hours is portrayed in a way that is reminiscent of frontier towns of the wild west in the mid-nineteenth century. It is interesting to note that the devastating 1918 influenza epidemic struck Barre just the year before the murder occurred. The Armistice signaling the end of World War I occurred that same year. Finally it should be mentioned that prohibition began six days after the trial ended.

The book includes some photographs of the murder scene as well as numerous excellent photos of Barre at the time. Most of the photos were entirely new to me. They are exceptionally well reproduced in the book.

The cover is a work of art; a masterful job created by artist Christopher Hoch. It is a rendering in black and gray taken from a photo of the victim that perfectly sets the stage for the story within. One might think black would be wrong from a marketing standpoint, but here it works beautifully.

This is the first book I’ve read in a long time that returns to the front of my mind even after months have passed since reading it. I find I want a sequel. I want to know more about the convicted killer. Were Barre townspeople convinced the verdict was correct? Why was Long pardoned after fifteen years? I want to know more about Barre at the time. I want to know what happened when prohibition closed the bars.

This book is inventive, not simply a formulaic rendering of a long-ago

murder. Well written, along with its excellent photographs, *One Less Woman* is a valuable contribution to Barre's local history. Belding's imaginative use of the local newspaper to carry the story provides a research model for local historians everywhere.

THOMAS DAVIS

*Thomas Davis is retired from a career in both federal and state government. He is the author of two anecdotal histories of Barre, Vermont: Out from Depot Square (2001), and the recently published Beyond Depot Square (2006).*

---

### *The Good Life of Helen K. Nearing*

---

By Margaret O. Killinger (Burlington, Vt.: University of Vermont Press; Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2007, pp. 146, \$28).

---

**H**elen and Scott Nearing inhabit a unique, if yet to be fully determined place in recent Vermont history. As the couple credited with having midwived late-twentieth-century America's "Back to the Land" movement, they served as philosophical, political, and spiritual mentors to thousands of seekers who visited their homesteads hoping for a glimpse of The Good Life. Though much has been written about the sixty years the Nearings spent living on the land, it is only now, through the respectful yet perceptive eye of Margaret Killinger, that we meet the influential, remarkable, recognizably human Helen Knothe Nearing herself.

Drawing upon Thoreau Institute archives, academic records, Helen Nearing's diaries, and interviews with Nearing friends and family, Killinger presents a portrait of Helen Nearing's life (1904–1995) that spans its many decades. Readers become familiar with her childhood, spiritual and political awakenings, relationship with Scott Nearing, and the emergence, practice, and concluding moments of "The Good Life." Killinger also grounds that life in its hidden truths: That this life might not have been possible without substantial inheritances and profitable real estate transactions; and that Helen's whimsical writing and successful marketing of their good life was largely responsible for the Nearings' ability to maintain it in their final years. *The Good Life of Helen K. Nearing* provides an ample depiction of the woman behind Forest Farm and the circumstances of her extraordinary life. This is its finest contribution.

Helen Knothe's fortunate beginnings afforded her the opportunity to travel widely, pursuing family-sanctioned interests in Theosophy and

music. Young Helen was encouraged to think of herself as special (her parents believed she was the reincarnation of Piet Meuleman, “mother of Dutch Theosophy,” an association Helen enjoyed). While a young woman, she met, formed a deep emotional bond, and traveled extensively with spiritual luminary Krishnamurti, benefiting from personal freedom experienced by few women of her time. She also developed a spiritual philosophy that would accompany her throughout life. With such auspicious beginnings, Helen seemed well suited for independence. She was spontaneous, played the violin, skated, skied, and yodeled. Yet, the tension of living life as a “New Woman” in the early twentieth century brought its own subtle constraints: According to Killinger, as Helen sought the company of “developed” people and a purposeful life, she “grappled with the question of whether she would ‘stand on her own’” (p. 29).

Helen Knothe met Scott Nearing (1883–1983) in the late 1920s, when her father asked her to engage Nearing’s services as a speaker (they had met once before; this re-acquaintance provided an opportunity for the two to become more deeply attached). Nearing was well known by then for his pronouncements on a variety of political topics. His skills as an orator and writer had won him both acclaim and the distinction of being blacklisted from academia for his radical views. Nearing continued to lecture, debate, run for office, and write about American imperialism and the progressive edict; by the time he met Helen, he had accumulated a wealth of experiences befitting a seasoned man. This, Helen found most attractive. Although their life together was not without its challenges (Killinger notes that Helen tolerated several of her husband’s dalliances with other women), Helen found in Scott “a brother soul, a comrade on the way, from whom I could learn and whom I could possibly help” (quoted in Killinger, p. 36).

For the next fifty-five years, the Nearings crafted their own purposeful life, based on an ethic of work, civic responsibility, contemplation, and play, and guided by the perennial question “How should one live?” Initially, Helen played the supportive role of secretary to Scott’s public persona. However, as they shifted the locus of their lives from New York to an experimental life in rural Vermont, Helen’s proclivity for organization, writing, and meeting the demands of a growing public began to assert itself. Although she treasured her solitude at Forest Farm, Helen became hostess to an emerging subculture of artists, students, and pacifists who saw homesteading as an alternative to an increasingly acquisitive Western culture. She did not disappoint; she also put them right to work.

Together, the Nearings wrote or edited fourteen books based on their homesteading experiences; but it was Helen who romanticized their “Good Life” and was largely responsible for its wide appeal. The search

for an authentic good life became “the story that Helen . . . would internalize and retell” (p. 65) in words, photographs, and collected sayings. It was and is a story that inspired and continues to inspire those seeking an antidote to an overconsumptive way of life.

Autobiographies seldom help us read between the lines, perhaps leading to impressions dominated by the author’s preferences for telling the tale. Killinger does a service to would-be homesteaders by calling attention to the realities of the Nearings’ good life and the conditions that contributed to its success—conditions that may be harder to come by in the early twenty-first century than they were in the middle of the twentieth. More importantly, *The Good Life of Helen K. Nearing* reveals a colorful, talented, at times taciturn woman whose love of nature, spiritual curiosity, and commitment to simple living clearly emerge as authentic facets of her life. No life is without its need for context and objective interpretation, and Killinger’s biography offers these. It also suggests that Helen K. Nearing’s life, in which she did find her own standing, was indeed a good one.

ANNIE DUNN WATSON

*Annie Dunn Watson is a faculty member at Burlington College, teaching on topics in psychology, social issues, and sustainability.*