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John McElroy (1846-1929) was an American printer, soldier, journalist and author, best known for writing the novel *The Red Acorn* (1885) and the four-volume *Andersonville: A Story of Rebel Military Prisons* (1879), based upon his lengthy confinement in the Confederate Andersonville prison camp during the American Civil War. It quickly became a bestseller and remained popular for the next twenty years. In 1864, he was among dozens of men captured in a skirmish near Jonesville, Virginia, by Confederate cavalrymen under William E. Jones. McElroy was sent to a variety of camps before being assigned to Andersonville prison, where he remained for the rest of the war. After the war ended, McElroy was released from captivity and transported back to the North. He settled in Chicago and resumed the printer's trade. He became a local reporter and newspaperman before moving to Toledo, Ohio, to become an editor of the *Toledo Blade*. In 1908, McElroy wrote *The Economic Functions of Vice*. The following year, he published *Struggle for Missouri*, a history of the bitter division over slavery that split the state's loyalties and led to armed conflict within its borders.

Andersonville Details

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Riley says

Some of this book is very powerful, but I found my attention straying by the end. It did get me thinking, however, on how screwed up the Civil War must have left a generation of Americans, given its horrors.

A passage of black humor that struck me:

"I had been in prison but a little while when a voice called out from a hole in the ground, as I was passing: 'S-a-y, Sergeant! Won't you please take these shears and cut my toes off?'

"'What?' said I, in amazement, stopping in front of the dug-out.

"'Just take these shears, won't you, and cut my toes off!' answered the inmate, an Indiana infantryman -- holding up a pair of dull shears in his hand and elevating a foot for me to look at.

"I examined the later carefully. All the flesh of the toes, except little pads at the ends, had rotted off, leaving the bones as clean as if scraped. The little tendons still remained and held the bones to their places, but this seemed to hurt the rest of the foot and annoy the man.

"'You'd better let one of the Rebel doctors see this,' I said, after finishing my survey, 'before you conclude to have them off. Maybe they can be saved.'

"'No; damned if I'm going to have any of them Rebel butchers fooling around me. I'd die first and then I wouldn't,' was the reply. 'You can do it better than they can. It's just a little snip. Just try it.'

"'I don't like to,' I replied. 'I might lame you for life and make you lots of trouble.'

"'O, bother! what business is that of yours? They're my toes, and I want 'em off. They hurt me so I can't sleep. Come, now, take the shears and cut 'em off.'

"I yielded, and taking the shears, snipped one tendon after another, close to the feet, and in a few seconds had the whole ten toes lying in a heap at the bottom of the dug-out. I picked them up and handed them to their owner, who gazed at them complacently, and remarked: 'Well, I'm darned glad they're off. I won't be bothered with corns anymore, I flatter myself.'"

Steve Nelson says

A good account of life in Civil War prison. The author, in the interest of completeness, add quite a bit of extraneous information that I found difficult to get through, but still very interesting first person account of Andersonville and other Georgia area prisoner of war prisons run by the Confederates.

Juanita Heffington says**MY TWO GREAT GRANDFATHERS WERE THERE!**

From what my great grandmother Elizabeth Carlile South told me it is all very accurate in the retelling. Forty years ago I stood on the soil of Andersonville and contemplated the suffering my great grandfather's had experienced so long ago. They both died before I was born in 1923. Byron South was granted a lifetime pension of \$2.00 per month for being in that prison. Great grandma received it for her lifetime. It must have been considered a lot of money in 1865.

David Bevan says

A remarkable if depressing account of man's inhumanity to man. It is amazing that the author survived the ordeal. The author brings a contemporary perspective to the war that is missing from today's historical recounts. For example, he refers to the war as the "Slave Owners Rebellion". Truly the Confederate POW camps of the Civil War were the precursors to the atrocities of WWII. The author has a vast vocabulary and will have you reaching for a dictionary more than once. Very well written and worth a read for Civil War buffs.

lynn rowley says**Terrific book for hist**

Terrific book for history buffs. Very personal in his style of writing. Somewhat repetitive but maybe for a reason. I would rate this book a four and a half.

Laura says

This book was on my to-read list because I'm interested in learning more about Georgia history. I thought it was going to be a rather dry recitation of historical facts about the infamous Confederate prison. I was so very wrong.

I was blown away by the story behind the history and the history in the story. Mr. McElroy and his colleagues suffered greatly and he painstakingly documented the suffering so that it wouldn't be forgotten or forgiven. Only one man was found guilty and hanged for the criminal acts perpetuated in Confederate prisons. Over 25,000 soldiers died in the span of 15 months.

The Project Gutenberg version of the book is 99% flawless.

Babs M says

Excellent book for anyone that wants a first hand account of a soldier during the Civil War. The actual experience of fighting, then the capture and trying to survive while those around you are starving, dying from scurvy, exposure, etc. He survived more than just Andersonville and his story is a must for anyone wanting to realize the experience.

Jeff Dawson says

One of the best stories I've read about the Civil War. Mr. McElroy speaks his mind as a prisoner of Andersonville and a few other Confederate prisons he was kept at.

How many have heard over the years that the holocaust could never happen again? The treatment of Union soldiers and the lack of humanity show them will have readers seeing the seeds of what the world would witness seventy years later in Nazi Germany. No, I'm not making a comparison to the Confederacy and Nazi Germany. I'm pointing out that men of unstable mental status when put in power over others will not only abuse their power, but when called to trial will say, "We were only following orders."

The story is not for the weak of heart. The prisoners were provided no shelter or sanitation facilities. Andersonville was a terrible place run by a tyrant, Wirz. The author paints an extremely vivid and at times horrendous picture of the everyday struggle to survive. In the beginning, he would lament over the loss of comrades but as time marched on and the losses mounted, he became less traumatized and more interested in what clothing or useful items he could obtain from his passed brethren. On the average, at least twenty men would die from disease, infection, starvation or loss of hope each day. Sound familiar?

What is even more fascinating is his descriptions of the different factions that formed in the prison. The "New Yorkers" were the most notorious. They preyed on any and every one they determined were weak or needed to be relieved of their valuables.

After reading this, one might not picture the confederate prison guards in a fair light. I know I did at times. How could men shoot defenceless prisoners for sport, simple whims or justification with no penalty? Top the squalor, lice and hopelessness of the confined and you will feel as depressed as they were. How the author survived is a true testament to self-survival.

In all fairness, I'll be seeking out works detailing with the Union prison camps. Appears Camp Douglas had many of the same deadly problems.

Some readers might not be keen on the language of the time. This is written with the words of the late Nineteenth Century which can be a bit off. There are some grammatical and formatting issues but nothing to detract from this honest memoir.

An excellent addition for Civil War buffs.

Five stars

David says

Shocking

I was compelled to find this book after watching the Ken Burns Documentary on the civil war and the Hell on Wheels series on Netflix. Both of these shows mentioned Andersonville. This book tells a story much like many stories of the Holocaust and other periods in our history where one group of human beings murdered others.

Mike says

Four volume work on the iniquity of the Confederate prison system and life in several of the prison camps. That so many died because of inhumane treatment is often passed over by histories of the Civil War and all we hear about are the famous battles where, even the slaughter of Shiloh and Gettysberg etc., are as little to the fatalities at Andersonville.

Nevertheless McElroy demonstrates the strength of the human spirit and it is a very readable work.

Emmett says

This is about the time I feel like a real shit for assigning stars to someone's work, particularly when it is a memoir of something so incomprehensibly horrible and tragic. But, yeah, fuck it, four stars, sure.

McElroy was an incredibly good writer, he is wonderful at turning a phrase and save for a few sloppy and a bit too flowery metaphors and the like he was great. As another reviewer has said, my attention started to wane a bit towards the end when he was going from camp to camp. After reading chapters about the daily hardships in Andersonville in which I was riveted, by the time he started to write about leaving Andersonville I had checked out mentally a little bit and my attention started to stray.

There isn't a lot I can say about the book. It's simply a very thorough account of life in Andersonville. It is incredibly readable for such a memoir, and once I got into the groove of his wordy type of cadence, the pages flew by. McElroy is even funny on several occasions, which I hadn't expected going into it.

OH, yeah! He did censor the curse words which was funny. An example (pg. 305 - CH. 57):

"The surly reply would be: 'Yes, you ---- black ----. What the ---- business is that of yours?'"

The horizontal lines are solid not segmented in the book, and all the same length, so no clues are given as to what the words are. But, it almost made a kind of madlibs game for me.

Andrea says

Painful history

The author spent about fifteen months in Andersonville prison and this is his story. At times, it's very difficult to read of the suffering that the prisoners endured, at other times, it's just a slow read. That being said, it is amazing and good that he survived to give this disturbing account of life in prison during the civil war.

Bob Conner says

I read this in high school and again as an adult. Both reads left me feeling like I no longer wanted to be part of the human race. What we can do to others? Appalling doesn't begin to describe the horrific conditions at Andersonville. And it wasn't unique to the South; atrocities are routinely committed by all sides, and both Andersonville and Camp Douglass are prime examples of the pure evil residing in humans.

I can't think of a more shocking book.

Brandi says

This is a book that is difficult to read because it spares no detail in explaining the horrific conditions in the Confederate POW camps. The soldiers endured condition comparable to Nazi concentration camps. Just outside the stockade was a forest full of tree, and yet the prisoners had no wood to build fires or shelter. They were given very little to eat and no medical treatment.

Ted Greiner says

This is probably the most difficult book I ever read. But also one of the best. It was very well written by a man who was one of the first to arrive there. It's full of interesting stories, amazing facts one has never heard of (e.g., the Confederate prison in Florence, South Carolina was even worse). In many ways, the Southerns who ran those prisons treated the prisoners worse than the Nazis treated theirs. At the trial of Captain Wirtz, the scapegoat who was hung after the war (who richly deserved it), dozens of nearby neighbors testified that there was plenty of food available in that part of Georgia at that time. Sherman also found plenty in the rest of the state.

We often hear that a relatively low percentage of the 35,000 men imprisoned there died, but that's because many were there only a short time. Of the 63 members of the author's brigade who entered Andersonville as it was opened, only 13 survived. Major causes of death were scurvy (easily avoided with inexpensive food sources of vitamin C) and exposure. Most men had to sleep on the ground, even in winter in freezing weather, while the camp was in a literal wilderness area surrounded by forest which they were not allowed to use to build huts or build reasonable fires for cooking their daily ration of less than one pint of poorly ground corn meal.

The general in charge, John H. Winder, bragged, "I am killing off more Yankees than twenty regiments in Lee's army." On July 27, 1964, in his order No. 13, he ordered that if Federal troops came within 7 miles of Andersonville, the guards were to "open upon the Stockage with grapeshot [using the numerous cannons that were trained on the prisoners] without reference to the situation beyond these lines of defense." Just like in the case of Nazi Germany, the leaders of the South knew very well what was going on.

