



An Uncommon Soldier: The Civil War Letters of Sarah Rosetta Wakeman, Alias Private Lyons Wakeman, 153rd Regiment, New York State Volunteers

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"I don't know how long before i shall have to go into the field of battle. For my part i don't care. I don't feel afraid to go. I don't believe there are any Rebel's bullet made for me yet."

--Pvt. Lyons Wakeman

Similar sentiments were expressed by tens of thousands of Civil War soldiers in their diaries and in their letters to loved ones at home. What transforms the letters of Pvt. Lyons Wakeman from merely interesting reading into a unique and fascinating addition to Civil War literature is who wrote them--for Private Wakeman was not what "he" seemed to be. The five-foot tall soldier's true identity was that of a simple young farm girl from central New York state named Sarah Rosetta Wakeman. Her letters, the only such correspondence known to exist, provide a rare glimpse of what life was like for a woman fighting as a common soldier in the Civil War under the guise of a man.

Written shortly after she left home to pursue her fortune in 1862, Rosetta's letters over the next two years tell of army life in the defences of Washington, D.C. and on the march and in battle during the 1864 Louisiana Red River Campaign. She wrote frequently to her family in Afton, NY, and her letters contain feelings and observations like those expressed by the majority of her fellow soldiers. We read of her determination to perform honorably the duty required of a soldier, the trials of hard marching and combat, her pride in being able to "drill just as well as any man" in her regiment, and her eventual fatalistic attitude toward military service, and her frequent expressions of faith in God and the afterlife. Although Rosetta did not survive the war, her letters remain as an singular record of female military life in the ranks, a phenomenon largely ignored by historians and researchers.

Private Wakeman was not alone in embarking on her strange adventure. Hundreds of women, from both the North and South, disguised themselves as men and enlisted in the armies of our nation's bloodiest war.

The experiences of these women during the Civil War are just beginning to be recognized as elemental to understanding the life of this country during those turbulent times. Little is known about these women precisely because they enlisted and served in constant secrecy, fearful of revealing their true identities. This unique collection of letters offers a firsthand look at the personality and character of a woman who defied convention to take a man's place in the Union army.

An Uncommon Soldier: The Civil War Letters of Sarah Rosetta Wakeman, Alias Private Lyons Wakeman, 153rd Regiment, New York State Volunteers Details

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From Reader Review An Uncommon Soldier: The Civil War Letters of Sarah Rosetta Wakeman, Alias Private Lyons Wakeman, 153rd Regiment, New York State Volunteers for online ebook

Lisa Burris says

After being spurred to read this book by the mention of women soldiers during a recent visit to Antietam, I was intrigued by Lyons Wakeman's story. Here, her story is partially told via letters she wrote home while she was in the army as part of the NY Volunteers.

What is fascinating about Wakeman is that, rather than hiding her enlistment in the Union army from her family, her letters indicate that her loved ones supported her decision and that even family friends wrote to her while she was in the field.

I recommend this book to anyone who is interested in women's or Civil War history. Although the book is short, it is a great historical record of a woman's experience masquerading as a man in the Union Army. The questions of why she enlisted, what her conflict with her mother may have been, and whether her comrades recognized her as a woman. This book will leave you eager to explore the very few historical documents about the hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of women who fought in the Civil War.

Trasa says

Fantastic book compiling the letters of a female, disguised as a male, who fought in the Civil War as part of the 153rd New York. Excellent job editing the original (mis)spelling, grammar oddities and other problems to reading the letters as prose. This really gave me an insight into Rosetta, and I loved reading about her coming alive in the newfound freedom as a man.

Julie says

An interesting read, once I got to the letters, which I just gobbled up in one go.

I would like to see this in the hands of a better biographer who could add depth and context -- would love to see what Candice Millard could spin out of these letters!

Jana Richards says

I enjoyed this book, especially after reading "I Shall Be Near To You" which is a novel based on these letters. I was surprised to see that there wasn't anything written about how hard it was for Sarah to pose as a man and that she was never found out. The novel spends more time focusing on that issue. This book was very short and an easy read. Very interesting.

Lisa says

Absolutely fascinating. The book noted that of the estimated 400 women that disguised themselves as men in order to fight in the civil war, at least six of them gave birth in camp. A letter from a fellow soldier revealed that many men had no idea that he was a she until she gave birth. Can you imagine?

Shala Howell says

Very thin book, so a very quick read, but a fascinating one. Almost worth picking up for the introduction alone, which provides lots of fascinating background on the 400 or so (known) women who dressed up as men and fought in the Civil War. I especially appreciated the social commentary on how exactly they could hope to get away with it -- cursory physical exams, badly fitting uniforms, dependence on clothing to indicate gender ("if it wears pants, it's male"), presence of lots of young boys in the Army whose voices haven't changed yet and weren't shaving, and of course, the extreme modesty of the society at the time, which didn't make it at all unusual for a young soldier to choose to bathe alone and shy away from using the public latrines. The funniest moment for me was the description of the soldier who wrote home to say that his sergeant, who had been sharing a tent with his Captain had had a child. (paraphrasing a bit) "What need have we of women, when we soldiers can have children of our own?" How much that was tongue in cheek and how much sheer willful obtuseness isn't clear from the introduction. My 2008 self declares that he must have been joking, but the editor of these letters believes that he may actually have just been expressing the extreme denial so many Army men had ("no woman could possibly handle this") that protected these women from discovery.

Lote L. says

A short and incredibly human read. Sarah Rosetta Wakeman's letters are full of grammar errors, pride and care for her family. A woman, disguised as a man, was able to serve in the army unnoticed for two years and was buried under the name of Lyons Wakeman, her male alias.

The letters do not differ from anything a man in the Civil War would write. Nothing stands out – no “feminine” worries, no higher goals in “gender equality”, just good old money, family worries, exchanges of practical gifts and a little pride in being able to endure hardships and give her family back some money. That really tares down the gender role-based expectations for what should a female think or do, or feel while being in the middle of a great big war, acting as a soldier. She isn't shocked or disgusted, or afraid more than she should be. She doesn't avoid hard work.

It is partly because she is from a lower class – because she knows what hard work means – it's easy for her to fit the “tough work, tough life” gender role of a male, instead of expressing the “fragile and caring” gender role of a female.

There is a lot of “caring” in Wakeman's letters, but not in a way that would differ from a male's perspective. I would definitely recommend this to anyone who's interested in history or feminism. Rosetta maybe isn't a typical role model, but she is so incredibly human and complex, that I just can't.

Donia says

Excellent overview, research, explanation of how women fought in the War Between The States. An Uncommon Soldier is based upon letters found in a family trunk. I can not rate this book as I would fiction. If there were ten stars available to assign to this rating, I would give them to this book. I applaud the work of putting it all together. The forward itself is worth the purchase. Even though I've visited several Civil War museums and have been a reenactor for many years, I never knew much of the history contained in this tiny little book.

Rebecca Dobrinski says

It is not often that readers find new stories from the Civil War. Sure, one comes across a person they may not have heard of, but a totally brand new story is a rarity. Lauren Cook Burgess gave her readers the gift of a new story in *An Uncommon Soldier*.

As a re-enactor, Burgess would be familiar with the nuances of life in the Civil War era. This would include knowing that many women served as soldiers during the conflict. In fact, Burgess participated in many re-enactments as a woman. If she had not run into issues with the National Park Service and her subsequent court case, Burgess may never had heard of Sarah Rosetta (Lyons/Edwin R.) Wakeman. Thanks to a timely letter from Wakeman's great-great-niece, Burgess was granted access to one of (and possibly the only) the most complete collections of letters and memorabilia from a female Union soldier. After leaving home for a brief stint on a coal barge, Rosetta Wakeman enlisted in the 153rd New York State Volunteer Infantry in 1862 and became Pvt. Lyons Wakeman.

Burgess' careful editing of Wakeman's letters offered readers an easy to read glimpse into the everyday life of the typical soldier. She wrote about drill and guard duties, troop movements, and the different locations where she was stationed. Wakeman wrote of her concerns about her relationships with family members and asked for news on those from her hometown who had also been drafted. One of her most consistent topics showed her concern for the financial status of her family. She often sent money home to help with the family debts and for individual family members to purchase things to remember her by. However, throughout the letters the reader can glean how Wakeman became accustomed to her independence. Had she survived the war, it would be easy to speculate that she would have continued to live independently, perhaps keeping up the masculine charade and permanently becoming either Lyons or Edwin R. Wakeman.

Interestingly, Wakeman never seemed to fear discovery through her letters as she signed most of them with her given name. It was not until her unit was well into Confederate territory in Louisiana that she began signing letters with a male alias. In modern times one often expects that letters home from members of the military are opened and read in case any sensitive information is included. In the nineteenth century, soldiers were apparently afforded more privacy in their communications.

An Uncommon Soldier benefits both scholars of Civil War and women's history. It adds yet another facet to the intricately woven stories of everyday soldiers during the war and shows that the soldier experience is universal regardless of gender. The book documents how women contributed to the war effort by doing more than nursing the sick, the typical nineteenth century image of women during the Civil War. Burgess' research and documentation of other women soldiers adds to the understanding of Wakeman's experience. In addition, the background she provided on the circumstances surrounding Wakeman's narrative of her time in the 153rd places the letters in their historical context.

easy to read and digest and provided the reader a look back in time to life as a soldier during the Civil War.

Eve says

part of research for my Vicksburg project... an elegantly and carefully annotated set of letters by a woman who passed as a man in the civil war. written by an otherwise ordinary soldier, the letters capture a rich glimpse of the choices a young woman made -- for freedom, for adventure, for autonomy -- in a world that did not easily offer these things to women.

Suzanne Hakeos says

Amazing book. I could not understand how a woman could hide as a man in the army, but I do now. It was a different time and views on gender identification were so much simpler.

Well researched about women soldiers in the Civil War, the 153rd's and Sarah Rosetta Wakeman's history.

The author did a great job of keeping the integrity of her letters together while helping the reader understand their contents and family references. The strength and conviction in Rosetta's voice calls out from the letters. I look forward to learning more about other women soldiers .

Thank you.

JoAnne says

I find it facinating to read about the women who braved the frontlines with the men in the Civil War. Some were discovered, some were not. Pvt. Wakeman's tale is amazing. Her letters home to her family tell what it was really like to be a part of that generation and although translations had to be made to her letters, as she was not the most literate, her feelings still come across the pages beautifully.

I also appreciate the time the author took in detailing their notations on the letters. Whenever they had to translate what Wakeman may have been saying, the author gave specifics on the events at hand.

It isn't a long book which made it a very easy read. I finished it in a day.

Straw says

I love the content here and hate the interpretation. I wish that historians writing in this area could maybe shelve their heterosexism for a freaking minute. Yes, women went with their lovers/partners to war and sometimes gave birth, but I'm betting dollars to donuts they weren't all hetero or even cis-gendered.

S.L. Hawke says

This is an incredible reference for anyone wanting a window into the time period. The introduction of the book is also fascinating, a reminder that though we are in the 21st century, well, the thinking towards women, remains 19th century, or lower.

A must for reenactors to read, and her list of bibliography is a good reason to own this book.

Nyri says

An intriguing look into the daily life of a woman who fought in the Union Army. Kudos to the editor for tweaking the original letters enough as to make them a bit more comprehensible. Makes one wonder how many others like her were out there.
