

Manhattan Book Review, June 2021

Love and Valor - Intimate Civil War Letters Between Captain Jacob and Emeline Ritner

By Charles F Larimer

Sigourney Press, \$41.99, 652 pages, Format: Trade

Star Rating: 5 / 5

On April 12, 1861, in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina, the first shot was fired in what would become known as the War of the Rebellion, and later, the American Civil War. Shortly after, President Abraham Lincoln issued a proclamation calling for 75,000 men to aid in the suppression of the rebellion against the government of the United States. In Iowa, Jacob Ritner was one of these men who answered that call and joined the newly formed 1st Iowa Infantry, to serve an enlistment term of three months. During this time, and his enlistments to follow, Jacob and his wife Emeline wrote numerous letters to each other. In these letters, compiled by Ritner's great great grandson, Charles Larimer, the couple discuss everything from the war to their children's ailments. They express their longing for each other and the hardships each faces because of Jacob's decision to serve his country. Though very much a novel of the Civil War, this work touches on themes still very timely. When a married soldier deploys, the partner left behind must somehow keep their life moving along. They must tend to the children, see to the house, and work hard at their own tasks. The more things change, the more they stay the same it seems.

It would be easy to discount this work as simply another gathering of material about Civil War military history. It is so much more. Because we have Emeline's answering letters to Jacob's, it is a rare look at domestic history in this time in a woman's own voice. We hear her fears and joys firsthand. We also have abolitionist history, social history, medical history, and so much more. This is truly a gold mine for researchers!

Love and Valor by Charles Larimer is a multi-layered, long researched work that defies easy categorization. On one hand, it is an epistolary non-fiction love story. Letters between Captain Jacob Ritner and his wife Emeline are loving and full of longing and deep emotion. It is also an important research document. Larimer has spent years compiling the letters as well as other historical documents which help to make this book a vital resource for scholars of the American Civil War. His numerous, careful annotations help to place the letters in a larger historical context. At its very basic core, this book is one man's tireless and determined genealogy project that very quickly took on a life of its own and grew into something even he could not have foreseen when he began. His work has contributed greatly to the scholarship of the Civil War period.

Reviewed by Tamara Benson