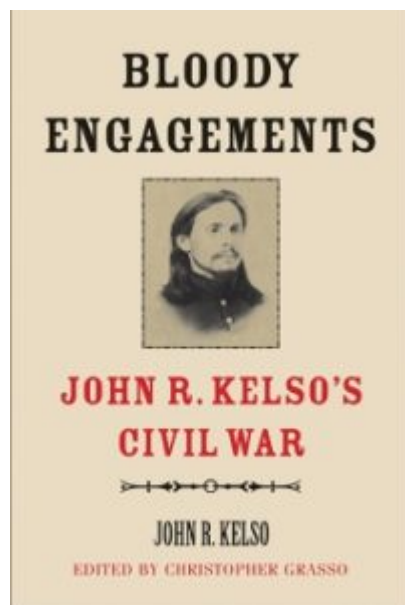
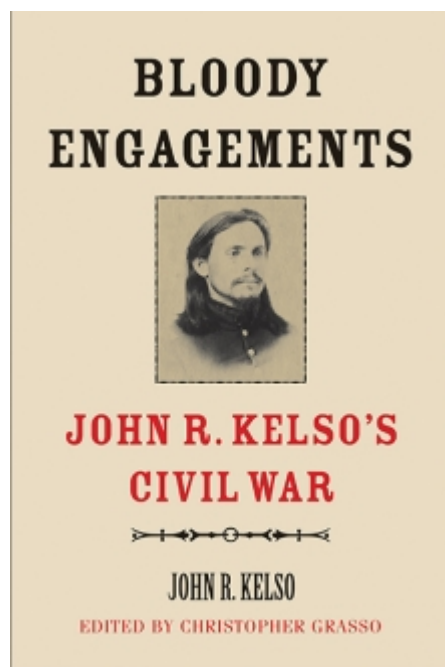


# Bloody Engagements



John R. Kelso, *Bloody Engagements: John R. Kelso's Civil War*, ed. Christopher Grasso. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017. 221 pp., \$35.

On a bitterly cold morning in February 1862, John Kelso found himself amid a group of Union Army stragglers on the Missouri-Arkansas border. Kelso, a Unionist from Missouri, had spent the night sleeping on the frozen ground, shivering with his coat over his head, and had scarcely eaten for several days. He was now trying to make his way back to his unit. As it became light, he saw dozens of injured and exhausted soldiers who had been pillaging nearby Confederate farms. One man had speared a huge rasher of bacon on his bayonet; another wore a pair of freshly killed turkeys draped over his shoulders like a

stole. And yet another, Kelso recalled, "a kind of Oscar Wilde, nearly seven feet in height, who cared more for the beautiful than the useful, wore upon the lower part of his body, the immense hooped skirt of some gigantic female; upon his shoulders, a large striped shawl; and upon his head, a huge, funnel-shaped, Leghorn bonnet of the style of fifty years ago."

Written in 1882—the same year Wilde traveled across the nation to preach the gospel of Aestheticism—Kelso's recently published "Auto-biography" often seems to predict the cross-dressing picaresque of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, published three years later. Impeccably edited by Christopher Grasso, *Bloody Engagements: John R. Kelso's Civil War* doesn't shed light on particular battles or historical events so much as it reveals the contingent, harrowing, and often surreal experiences of an individual soldier in a border state that experienced some of the least-known but nonetheless bloodiest guerrilla fighting of the entire conflict.

Kelso was never a major figure in the Civil War. Born in 1831, he graduated from Pleasant Ridge College on the Missouri-Kansas border the same year John Brown launched his ill-fated raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859. As Grasso explains in his introduction, Kelso became a "preacher and schoolteacher turned Civil War guerrilla fighter who subsequently became a congressman calling for the impeachment of President Andrew Johnson, then later a public agnostic, a spiritualist lecturer, and eventually an anarchist." He managed all this in just fifty-nine years.

Kelso's Civil War experiences were confined mainly to Missouri, a theater that included very few large-scale battles such as Antietam or Gettysburg but was marked instead by persistent and vengeful guerrilla actions. Neighbors literally fought neighbors in what many historians have described as a war within a war. Southern partisan rangers and Union-sympathizing Jayhawkers burned houses and destroyed the crops of their opponents. Rape and assault are portrayed in Kelso's recollections as frequent weapons of war.

In this brutal and often ambiguous terrain, Kelso's greatest tactic was disguise. He and his men dress in borrowed rags to impersonate hapless farmers or Confederate sympathizers in order to capture and sometimes execute opponents. One reason this approach worked so well is because Kelso got along with proslavery families almost as well as with those who supported the Union. In fact, while Kelso occasionally articulates antislavery sentiments, his motivations for fighting seem more personal than ideological. He is driven by revenge after Confederate neighbors torched his house. Even persistent anxiety about his wife's infidelities with a handsome Union physician fuels his rage, which he directs toward the enemy instead of confronting her.

One of the great pleasures of reading *Bloody Engagements* involves the footnotes. Grasso has scrupulously tracked down every name and village Kelso mentions, and the military operations he participates in are given historical specificity by frequent references to the compendious *War of Rebellion: A*

*Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. The result is a richly dialogic text, a case study in the way official language obscures as much as it reveals. In an otherwise inconsequential engagement in Ozark, Missouri, for instance, Kelso reports that he found one lieutenant "trying to persuade a handsome young colored woman to accompany him" while another officer was busy plundering gold and jewelry from a Confederate house. The same episode is reported as follows by the officers in question: "We collected about 50 head of horses, 5 wagons and teams, and a considerable amount of other property useful to the army. . . ."

Kelso's own volatile language registers the topsy-turvy world of guerrilla warfare, reflecting Melville's observation in "A Utilitarian View of the Monitor's Fight" that war would challenge conventional heroic poetry and force alterations in the way combat was imaged. Kelso's coldblooded depictions of the day-to-day grind of soldier life foreshadow the imaginative work of Stephen Crane and others, but they are also interspersed with treacly homilies and a residual Romanticism that is jarring in its quaintness. This is especially the case when women are involved. Describing a governess who begged Kelso and men not to burn down her employer's house, he writes that the young woman died of "heart disease brought on by excessive fright" later that night, prompting him to apostrophize: "Oh! war! war! why shouldst thou ever exist?"

In truth, though, one of the strongest impressions we receive from Kelso's recollections is his gratitude that war did exist. The comparatively undisciplined life of a Missouri regiment allows him enormous freedom from the civilian responsibilities of teaching, preaching, and parenthood. One of his favorite activities is to abandon his unit in order to wander the Ozark wilderness, ostensibly scouting Confederate movements but instead enjoying the respite from social and military duties. "For me, this wild life and these wild scenes had an indescribable charm, and I was as nearly happy, I suppose, as so restless a spirit can ever be." Like many veterans, he seems also to have become something of an adrenaline junkie; in one emblematic passage, he approaches a house filled with sleeping Confederate soldiers and experiences "a kind of strange, wild delight in the very madness of my undertaking."

As his "Auto-biography" progresses, Kelso becomes less reticent about a disturbing fact: He enjoyed killing. In civilian life, Kelso was bookish, vain, pugnacious, and a compulsive braggart. During wartime, he found his true *métier*, becoming a ruthless and efficient killer. In one extended passage, he finds himself chasing a running soldier, trying to shoot him in the back but discovering that the dew has fouled his revolver. "I still pursued [him], however," Kelso writes, "determined, if possible, to strike him down with the barrel of my revolver. His long, slender white legs fairly whizzed through the young hazels and briars. . . I wanted him very much. If I had had ten thousand dollars, I would, in my excitement just then, have given it for the ability to run just a little faster. In spite of my utmost efforts, however, he out-ran me and made his escape. I felt that in not letting me kill him, he had done me a great wrong."

While Kelso erases actual scenes of killing from his memoirs, he brags about killing dozens of Confederates during the course of the war. Ultimately, this relish for killing becomes a dominant strain in his memoir. *Bloody Engagements* is a vivid, if minor, addition to Civil War life writing, but it is also a powerful document for the stories it does not tell. Kelso would not continue in the military after the Civil War, but his experiences shed light on those who did and who turned their attention westward to places where the pleasures of killing could continue among native populations for the remainder of the century.

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