

Reader Reviews

Send Me a Pair of Old Boots & Kiss My Little Girls **The Civil War Letters of Richard and Mary Watkins**

“Mr. Toalson has produced another wonderful collection of letters from the War Between the States. Richard and Mary Watkins take you on a personal four year “tell all” journey. What a great trip through the history of the war! . . . My family was from southern Virginia and reading Richard and Mary’s language and phrasing transported me back in time and had me sitting at the kitchen table listening to my grandparents. I am doing “right well” and you need to “make haste” and read this book.”

Lt. Cmdr. Don Woolridge
SCV Camp 2095
James City Cty., Virginia

“I savored this book . . . and was sad to have it come to an end. I quickly became very fond of Richard, Mary and their family . . . It was inspiring to realize the depth of Mary’s strength . . . and she did it with great courage and a tremendous lack of self pity. Richard, even in the worst of times, always had positive comments. They both are truly remarkable people. . . . huge lessons can be learned from them by us today in dealing with difficult challenges without giving in to bitterness and total despair. . . . Thank you for making it possible for us to step back in time and learn how to live . . . with dignity and determination.”

Donna Wixson
Williamsburg, Virginia

“Almost any time personal papers are rescued from the obscurity of the archives and made available to the public, there is cause for celebration. This is particularly true of the recently published *Send Me a Pair of Old Boots & Kiss My Little Girls*, edited by Jeff Toalson. Based on the letters of Richard and Mary Watkins . . . these letters recount a true love story and, at the same time, reveal rich details of everyday life in war-torn Virginia. . . . *Send Me a Pair of Old Boots & Kiss My Little Girls* deserves a wide audience . . . it will appeal to the male Civil War readership (campaigning with the 3rd Virginia Cavalry) but it deserves the attention of those who are more interested in the details of home and family life in Virginia during America’s greatest conflict.”

Russ Smith – BOOK REVIEW
The Free Lance Star – May 9, 2009
Fredericksburg, Virginia

“. . . Richard and Mary’s letters contain such a wealth of information . . . You become intimately involved in their “conversations” . . . Mary’s letters resonate with her grit and spirit . . . truly a great love story.”

Lorraine Beasley
Croaker, Virginia

“Jeff Toalson weaves a Civil War love story that stands the test of time. The worry and heartache of separation and issues of home that Richard and Mary faced are the same challenges faced by military families today. As readers, we are blessed that both were excellent writers . . . I truly savored their letters and fell in love with the whole family . . . it is so personal . . . at the very heart of it this is very much a love story . . . *Send Me a Pair of Old Boots & Kiss My Little Girls* is a treasure.”

J. R. Snider – Radio Host
Triad Live & Local – WSJS
Winston-Salem, N. Carolina

“Richard and Mary’s letters are touching and intriguing, weaving both a love story and an intense personal eyewitness account of the war. This . . . rare collection . . . brings a clear sense of humanity to the conflict and its affects on those who lived through the time.”

iUniverse
Bloomington, Indiana

“. . . I am pleased that these letters have gotten the attention they deserve . . . It warms an archivist’s heart to know that the collections that he or she has worked hard to acquire and preserve . . . have produced such a useful and carefully documented transcription.”

E. Lee Shepard
Director of Manuscripts & Archives
Virginia Historical Society
Richmond, Virginia

“*Boots & Kisses*, like a fine cup of tea, is steeped with romance, adventure & drama . . . all the ingredients of a novel. Knowing it is true, and all first hand, just adds to the excitement. Captain Watkins, writing frequently . . . oftentimes repeats himself in his correspondence . . . which just adds authenticity. This is one of the finest collections of letters that I have ever read. Mr. Toalson’s arrangement and editing of the letters along with his selective editorial comments and explanations are what makes this book such a good read.”

Roy A. Fleming
Winston-Salem, N. Carolina

“I normally read murder mysteries . . . stories that grab my attention and require me to turn the page to find out what happens next. *Send Me a Pair of Old Boots & Kiss My Little Girls* fulfilled that requirement . . . I looked forward to the next letter from either Richard about Company K and the war or Mary about life at home and their hardships.”

Clet Gatzke
Inver Grove Heights, Minnesota

“*Boots & Kisses* is, without a doubt, the best transcription of Confederate war letters that I have ever had the pleasure of reading.”

Troy D. Marshall
New Market, Virginia

LETTERS TELL OF LOVE, WAR

BOOK REVIEW – Russ Smith

The Free Lance – Star, Fredericksburg, Virginia – May 9, 2009

Almost any time personal papers are rescued from the obscurity of the archives and made available to the public, there is cause for celebration. This is particularly true of the recently published *Send Me a Pair of Old Boots & Kiss My Little Girls* edited by Jeff Toalson.

Based on the letters of Richard and Mary Watkins that are preserved at the Virginia Historical Society, these letters recount a true Civil War love story and, at the same time, reveal rich details of everyday life in war-torn Virginia.

Richard Henry Watkins and Mary Purnell (DuPuy) Watkins were married on Aug. 24, 1858, and lived at Oldham near Meherrin in southern Prince Edward County. Richard's real estate was valued at \$10,000 and his personal property at \$25,000 in the 1860 census reports. The latter figure is mostly accounted for by 27 slaves. However, even with the many slaves, the Watkinses don't seem to have enjoyed great wealth. Their letters are full of concern about crops and money even before wartime conditions begin to take their toll.

Although they already had two children at the beginning of the war, Richard and Mary's letters to each other read like those of newlyweds. Fortunately, they don't indulge in the more florid language of the period. They are more direct, as Richard is when he says, "I love you, I love you, love you, love you, love you" in a letter of Aug. 29, 1862. Clearly, both made a big sacrifice when Richard joined the Prince Edward Dragoons early in the war.

The letters are full of the minute details of both camp and home life. Richard reviews the duties of a quartermaster and even describes the furnishings of his tent. Mary keeps him informed of the development and antics of the children as well as the day-to-day concerns of running a plantation, including crop failures and hog slaughtering.

Mary gives a particularly poignant description of Christmas in 1863 with stockings being filled with apples, nuts and candy. The Yankees are blamed for Santa Claus being unable to deliver a china doll.

The roles of the sexes are necessarily altered during the war. Mary gains confidence in managing the plantation as time goes on, deferring only major decisions to Richard. Still, she continually refers to everything on the farm as his ("your corn," "your wheat," etc.) For his part, Richard maintains control of the money that they have in the care of a local merchant.

Richard's company becomes part of the 3rd Virginia Cavalry and continues with that unit throughout the war. Eventually, Richard becomes the company commander, a post that he does not relish and from which he unsuccessfully tried to resign. He is wounded at

Aldie in Northern Virginia and at Tom's Brook in the Shenandoah Valley. The Tom's Brook wound disables him from further service.

Although present-day notions of why the war was fought may be complex, there was no such ambiguity in Richard's mind. In passing through the Shenandoah Valley, he marvels at how universally loyal the residents are to the Confederacy. He says, "We find the people in the Valley still loyal & true, I am agreeably surprised at this for a large majority of them are without slaves, very many never having owned them . . ."

Richard was probably viewed as a kind master by the standards of the time. He writes to Mary, "Am delighted you take so much interest . . . in the welfare of the negroes." He also tells her to direct the overseer "not to expose the negroes in bad weather." Whether this attitude was self-serving or not is, of course, open to question, since so much of his wealth was tied up in human capital.

Fredericksburg is mentioned twice in the letters. In August, 1863 Richard visits the Fredericksburg battlefield. He is surprised that the town isn't damaged any more than it is. Apparently, the stories of the town's destruction were inflated as they spread through the army. In September he goes back to Fredericksburg to purchase blankets and coats for his slaves. He buys these from the "poor people" who had gathered them from the battlefield . . .

Send Me a Pair of Old Boots & Kiss My Little Girls deserves a wide audience. No doubt it will appeal to the predominately male Civil War readership, but it also deserves the attention of those who are more interested in the details of home and family life in Virginia during America's greatest conflict.
