

## William G. Donnan

Among the thousands of Iowans who served in the Civil War was William G. Donnan, a native New Yorker who moved to Independence, Iowa, in 1856. He was admitted to the Iowa bar that same year and began practicing law. He also served as treasurer and recorder of Buchanan County from 1857 until 1862 when he joined the 27<sup>th</sup> Iowa Infantry. After the war he would serve in the Iowa Senate followed by two terms in the U.S. House of Representatives (1871-1875)<sup>i</sup>

When he joined the 27<sup>th</sup> Iowa Infantry he was mustered in as a second lieutenant. He was later promoted to first lieutenant and was brevetted captain and major before being mustered out in August, 1865.<sup>ii</sup> Donnan kept up a voluminous correspondence with his wife Mary for at least the first two years of his service. The correspondence that has survived continued until April, 1864, although he served until the end of the war.<sup>iii</sup> His letters home included observations from the mundane to the sublime, from petty personal annoyances to shrewd analysis of the political and military objectives of the war and the growing moral sense among Unionists of the necessity to sustain the pursuit of those objectives. The value of his correspondence does not lie in military valor or heroism on the battlefield because Donnan saw little front line duty. Rather his letters home cast light on many other aspects of military life during the Civil War that remain largely unnoticed today but which were nevertheless just as important to our understanding of the war as fighting pitched battles.

Donnan reported first to Camp Franklin near Dubuque thinking that he would be assigned to the 21<sup>st</sup> Iowa Infantry. When he arrived he found 1,800 other soldiers in

camp, many of whom were being assigned to the 21<sup>st</sup> Iowa. The surplus recruits, including Donnan, were then assigned to the 27<sup>th</sup> Iowa Infantry. Donnan shared the initial optimism and sense of excitement of new recruits for the cause of the Union. While still in camp he wrote to Mary that “I believe I shall like the life of the soldier.” He also chafed under the lack of activity while in camp from late August until late October and lack of orders as to when the 27<sup>th</sup> Iowa would head out of Dubuque and toward the fighting.

Throughout his service Donnan remarked to Mary about how his own health was quite good and even at times complained about how he was gaining weight. However, he was not at all insensitive to the suffering of other soldiers. He made many references to the large number of men suffering and dying from disease as well as on the battlefield and keenly observed that many more men died of disease than of battle injuries. He told Mary of how one of the hardest men in the regiment became sick and eventually died in the hospital.

Donnan frequently exhibited a visual reaction to his surroundings. In November, 1862, he traveled through Cairo, Illinois, as most Iowa troops did at one time or another, while being sent down to the Vicksburg area. He was not particularly impressed. “Cairo is a nasty muddy, unhealthy place and we feel as though more than half our men will be sick if we remain 2 weeks longer...” A few days later he found Memphis, Tennessee, a refreshingly different place, remarking on the beauty of the city with its stately oak and magnolia trees. The following August, he was posted at Clarendon, Arkansas, and remarked wistfully how the prairie land there reminded him of Iowa. His keen eyes also observed people. He gave Mary a detailed description of General Grant who he saw at

Fort Pickering in mid-January, 1863, as “ a very fine looking man he is, but very plain, farmer-like—rather broad face—pleasant eye—but of heavy, slow movement.”

Donnan was stationed at various headquarters in Tennessee, Arkansas, and Louisiana including Fort Pickering near Memphis, Camp Reed near Jackson, Tennessee, at Moscow, Tennessee (a short distance east of Memphis), at Clarendon, Arkansas and Little Rock, and at Alexandria, Louisiana. While at Moscow he ran the Provost Marshal's Office. An episode that was both comic and serious occurred when, in June, 1863, he was appointed to serve on a court martial board. Apparently, reports got back home that he was being court-martialed, and he wrote a letter to Mary that started off very bluntly and emphatically that she needed to tell everybody at home that he was on the court martial board and that he was most certainly not being court martialed.

Also, like many other soldiers writing home, he told Mary of his loneliness and desire to be home. At one point, he wrote to Mary that he had decided that he was afraid to ask for leave because it would make him think about it so much that he would be overwhelmed with homesickness and that it would simply be better to remain on duty.

Donnan also commented on war strategy repeatedly in his letters to Mary. Through the winter and spring of 1863 he commented in many letters of the strategic importance of capturing Vicksburg. He believed that if Vicksburg could be taken, the rebellion would collapse in short order. Even before Vicksburg was taken, he believed the rebellion was ripe for collapse. In a letter dated February 5, he cited three reasons for an early end to the war: (1) Confederate hopes for foreign intervention were lost (it was actually still possible though deteriorating at this point because Lincoln's recent Emancipation Proclamation was moving public opinion in England and France more in

favor of the Union); (2) widespread destitution and hunger if Vicksburg is taken (this did occur although the rebellion continued for the better part of two years; and (3) slaves were more unmanageable (this was true in areas close to the fighting but not always true elsewhere.) On July 22, several weeks after the fall of Vicksburg, he wrote to Mary that he felt the days of the rebellion were drawing to a close. Also, in a letter of May 17, he commented to Mary that the Confederate loss of Generals Jackson and Van Dorn would also hurt the Confederate cause.

Until the Civil War, blacks were never allowed to serve in the United States armed forces, but this became an issue as the conflict became more severe and casualties were mounting. By 1862 it was apparent to the Confederacy, and a year later to the Union, that neither of them had enough volunteers and might have to turn to conscription. While Confederates resisted enlisting blacks until almost the very end of the war out of sheer fear of arming former slaves, the Union began to consider the possibility. Even then, many Unionists opposed it because of the nearly universal belief among whites at that time in the racial inferiority of blacks. During the lame duck session of Congress in the winter of 1863, a conscription bill was debated and then adopted on March 3. Donnan favored allowing blacks to enlist, suggesting in a letter to Mary that from what he had seen and experienced, they were as capable of bearing arms as whites, although white prejudice at that time thought otherwise. He also saw this as a new source of enlistments to help the Union cause.

Although Donnan saw little direct military action he was still close enough to it to see its effects firsthand. As stated, he saw directly the suffering of the troops from disease during the 27<sup>th</sup> Iowa's first year in the field and suffering from battlefield duty

during the disastrous Red River Expedition under General Nathaniel Banks in the spring of 1864. Donnan initially went with the expedition but was sent back to Memphis before the main encounters the expedition had with the Confederates. He heard quickly of the “temporary” repulse and casualties in Memphis in mid-April and noted in a letter to Mary a few weeks later that nearly everyone was “really disgusted with General Banks.”

There are no more known letters from Donnan to Mary after May, 1864, although he served to the end of the war. A likely possibility is that he continued writing to her but the later letters have been lost. After he was mustered out of service at Clinton, Iowa, on August 8, 1865, he returned to Independence and resumed the practice of law. In 1867 he was elected to the Iowa State Senate and re-elected in 1869. In 1870, he was elected to the U.S House of Representatives as a Republican and was re-elected in 1872. In 1874, he chose not to run for re-election and resumed his law practice in Independence. However, he remained active in Republican Party politics, serving as a delegate to the Republican national convention in 1884 and as chairman of the Republican state central committee from 1884-1886. He also served again in the Iowa State Senate from 1884 to 1886. He lived on at Independence until his death on December 4, 1908, at age 74. He was interred at Oakwood Cemetery at Independence.

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<sup>i</sup> Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774-1989. U.S. Government Printing Office, 1989, p. 920.

<sup>ii</sup> Logan, Guy E., Roster and Records of Iowa Troops in the Rebellion. State of Iowa, 1911. See 27<sup>th</sup> Iowa Infantry.

<sup>iii</sup> The letters can be found in the Iowa State Archives in the State Historical Building in Des Moines. They were donated to the Historical Department in 1929 by his son Don Donnan.