

Childhood Friends Torn Asunder by Secession

Long Time Gone: Neighbors Divided by Civil War,
by Les Rolston, Mariner Publishing

Reviewed by James Hall

Elisha Hunt Rhodes and James Sheldon, both sons of salty sea captains, grew up as next-door-neighbors in a small Rhode Island town. Pawtuxet Village was certainly not a booming port, and it wasn't particularly elegant or quaint. In fact, as one Rhode Island historian put it, the village was "a bit seedy, full of hearty, hard-working New Englanders." The lives of its residents revolved around the ocean to the point that, according to author Les Rolston, "the day was ruled by a natural clock—the tides."

Growing up, Rhodes and Sheldon enjoyed a Tom Sawyer–Huck Finn friendship, but circumstances led the two young men to part company and become warriors, donning the uniforms of opposing armies. Rhodes wore blue as a member of the 2nd Rhode Island Infantry, while Sheldon went into battle for the Confederacy, becoming a member of the 50th Georgia Infantry.

Long Time Gone follows the divergent—but yet in many respects similar—paths of these two childhood chums throughout and beyond the war, exploring the major engagements in which they participated. Both men were witness to the full range of war's horrors. Rolston doesn't glamorize combat; his writing is often disturbingly graphic in detailing the grisly reality of the battlefield.

If a Hollywood screenwriter were to write a fictional account of this story, the two boyhood buddies would eventually find themselves struggling with their conscience at the prospect of

firing shots at each other during a climactic battlefield encounter. In reality, that never happened—though Rolston points out that the two childhood friends did come close to finding themselves face-to-face on bloody battlefields several times.

Long Time Gone is not only thoroughly researched, it also succeeds in bringing to life the common soldier's experiences during the war—from both blue and gray perspectives. In the process, however, we come to know much more about Rhodes' thoughts, feelings and experiences than we do about Sheldon's, since Rhodes left behind an unusually

extent to which Rhodes cared to commune with his former enemies.

Unfortunately, James Sheldon did not leave behind a diary. His observations are, by necessity, relatively sparse in *Long Time Gone*.

Rolston's aim throughout, I presume, was to make sure his book was of interest to a broad readership rather than just other Civil War historians and aficionados. But any well-read buff might find it more than a bit distracting to plod through a number of famous incidents, stories and quotations that he or she long ago memorized from other books, magazines and films. This expansive treatment also



James Sheldon

Elisha Hunt Rhodes

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‘This is my fourth Christmas in the Army. I wonder if it will be my last’

—Elisha Hunt Rhodes, Petersburg, 1864

detailed and introspective diary, which would—many decades after the war was over—make Rhodes and his story known to millions of latter-day Americans thanks to Ken Burns' popular television epic. Rolston manages to incorporate Rhodes' candid reflections frequently and effectively in his text.

At Appomattox following the surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia, Rhodes recounts a discussion he had with some Confederates—men who would have been trying to kill him just a few days before. "They all seem surprised at our kind treatment of them.... they are as glad as we [are] that the war is over," he observed. But that encounter demonstrated the

adds some excess narrative baggage to a hefty book that stretches to more than 500 pages in length.

It's obvious that Rolston thoroughly immersed himself in this project. Researchers will appreciate the fact that he includes a meticulous bibliography and end notes, many photographs and also a detailed account of the two subject's lives in the years following the war.

For many Americans North and South, the war represented a great adventure as well as a soul-wrenching crucible in which brothers, relatives and friends were forced to undertake the role of mortal enemies. *Long Time Gone* helps us to better understand that very real paradox.