Bell Wiley entitled the last chapter of *The Life of Johnny Reb* “What Manner of Men.” In twenty-four pages he categorized the diversity of the Confederate army’s “random types” and “exceptional types,” as he called them. Then, on the twenty-fifth and last page, he dismissed all of them and returned to his focus on the “average” soldier. “The average Rebel private,” Wiley concluded, was not exceptional at all, but rather “in most respects an ordinary person.” He was a “middle-class,” southern-born yeoman, more than likely unmarried and probably from a non-slaveholding family. If he was intolerant and rough around the edges, he also was “respectable, sturdy and independent.” And if he sometimes swore or gambled, his “deep-seated conventionality” and Christian faith prevented excess. Like all soldiers he carped and complained, and his morale wavered, but on the battlefield, brave and determined, Johnny Reb rose to greatness.¹

Over the sixty-six years since *Johnny Reb*’s publication, scholars of the Civil War soldier largely have continued to follow Wiley’s lead when it comes to Johnny and his foe, Billy Yank. To be sure recent historians have moved well beyond Wiley’s seemingly descriptive approach to one that is increasingly analytical. Many including my fellow panelists, dispute his general dismissal of ideological motivations for service, including the preservation of slavery. Nonetheless we all sooner or later comb through those same letters and diaries just as Wiley did in order to come to grips with the life and mind of that average soldier. As a result, the modern student seeking to understand him
and what he fought for will find in the library long, tightly-packed shelves of books from which to choose. But on the other hand, one will not find much in them about Wiley’s “random types,” and very little indeed about some of them. Histories of those “exceptional” soldiers remain, well, rather exceptional. If scholarship on the Civil War soldier is to advance beyond now-familiar questions and semantic debates in the next generation, I suggest that one approach would be to look more to those Johnny Rebs whose alleged oddities landed them in Chapter 27, men and a few women whose different motivations, lives, and perspectives promise a fresh perspective from which to view the whole.2

Let’s start with nativity. While most Johnny Rebs were Southern-born, Wiley concluded that thousands of Confederate soldiers must have come from the North. His random sampling of the descriptive rolls of twenty-one regiments turned up eighty-six privates born north of the Mason-Dixon line, almost half of them from New York. Published volumes on one or another of them exist, such as the edited diary of the New Jersey actor turned soldier Hiram Smith Williams. Yet there is no systematic study of northerners in gray. Something along the lines of Richard Nelson Current’s work on Southerners who fought in blue might well yield new insights into soldier motivations and especially local, initial pressures to enlist.

There are greater opportunities involving ethnicity. Wiley’s discussion of foreign-born Southerners generally follows familiar ground, with the bulk of the section devoted to Confederates who hailed from Germany and Ireland. To be sure, there are works on Irish Confederates and their units, although there is no modern equivalent to our moderator’s study of Irishmen in blue. German Confederates more surprisingly still
await their chroniclers, although Susannah just told me about a forthcoming work from Andrea Mehrlander, as well as her own forthcoming edited collection. Moreover, as Wiley admitted, the Sean Rebs and Johann Rebs did not comprise all of the foreign-born in Confederate uniform. Wrote Wiley, “The British, the French, the Poles, the Canadians, the Dutch, the Austrians and the many other nationalities represented in Southern ranks all made their distinctive contributions to the Lost Cause.” But what contributions? And to paraphrase Butch Cassidy, who were those guys? Of course, such research demands fluency in French, German, or Polish, and as a rule American Civil War historians do not regard their foreign language examinations as their finest hour of doctoral study. As a student-archivist at the Illinois Historical Survey, I routinely copied and provided access to regimental files that scholars in the end would return unused because they were written in German. And as a researcher I continue to remember the moment of angst that corresponded with the discovery of a potentially useful letter that happened to be in Norwegian. But I also have profited recently from the letters of a young German-speaking Texan named Friedrich Niebuhr. Such studies surely would expand what we know about Confederates soldiers and the causes for which they fought.3

To be sure, Wiley devoted more ink to ethnic minorities within Confederate camps than he did to non-Southerners. He focused on Native Americans and African Americans. While his treatment of the former remains familiar and unexceptional, his discussion of blacks strikes the modern reader in one sense at least as almost prescient, as if he anticipated by more than a half-century the modern silliness regarding so-called “Black Confederates.” Interested readers be warned, you will search The Life of Johnny Reb in vain for those tens of thousands of Confederate African Americans one regularly
encounters on the internet, loyal rebels who eagerly chose to take up arms and fight to keep their loved ones in chains. But they will find many African Americans in camp. During the early stages of the war, according to Wiley, Rebel camps were full of African Americans who toiled in slavery as personal body servants and laborers. If a few rushed to the front to take part in battle, he added, most of them remained in the rear.

Yet Wiley’s sixty-plus-year old discussion unsurprisingly also reflects now-superseded scholarship on slavery and the master-slave relationship. Citing the familiar, faithful body servant caring for his wounded, white childhood friend, for instance, Wiley goes on to maintain that “there were some instances of unfaithfulness and of cruel treatment, but the circumstances of the soldier-servant relationship made these much less frequent in the army than on the plantation….the life of the body servant was generally not a hard one.” Indeed according to Wiley, body servants ate well, regularly earned money in exchange for accomplishing various tasks, and were able “to play the hero” when visiting home. The slave’s “ready laugh” and “proficiency with song and guitar,” he continued, additionally boosted the morale of all. Forced laborers did have it worse, Wiley agreed, especially those who toiled on entrenchments. And in discussing the Confederacy’s final decision in 1865 to arm black soldiers, he notes that Lee’s surrender at Appomattox prevented the “ironic spectacle of Negroes fighting for the cause of Southern independence and the perpetuation of their own bondage.” Yet here clearly is a topic desperately in need of updating and expansion. Happily, Peter Carmichael’s forthcoming work on body servants should stimulate even more serious research on the topic.
But still other random types await their students. Wiley typically broke down his cohorts by age, with due attention paid to both “oldsters” and “boys” as he called them, but the latter group attracted most of Wiley’s attention. While we have some modern studies of the younger generation—again Pete Carmichael’s work comes to mind—the “oldsters” have not been studied as a group. That void looms as even more important when one cross-references them to another group of Confederates who turn up briefly in the chapter, the reluctant rebels who joined the army as substitutes and conscripts. According to James McPherson, fifteen percent of all of the men who would eventually serve the Confederacy during the war, roughly 120,000 soldiers, entered the army unwillingly as conscripts, beginning in the spring of 1862. Almost another nine percent, 70,000 men, arrived in camp as substitutes who had enlisted tardily for the money given to them by other Confederates who wanted to remain out of the war. Yet Wiley has little to say about these 190,000 Confederate soldiers, 24 percent of the army, almost one out of four Johnny Rebs ever in uniform, except that with a few exceptions to the contrary, more veteran soldiers saw them as “cowards, skulkers, shammers, useless and worthless.” And of course most recent scholars, also focusing on that average soldier who in fact usually turns out to be an 1861 enlistee, again follow Wiley’s lead, and generally repeat those same charges. But are they true? We have Mark Weitz’s studies of desertion and Lesley Gordon’s essay on so-called “cowards,” but by and large historians, openly or covertly, shun the less attractive soldiers as much as their comrades supposedly did. But how do we then explain the actions of the many men who avoided service, ran away from battle, or deserted entirely? What of their motivations, their ideology, their beliefs about slavery? Or to state the question differently, should historians’ value judgments and
personal preferences justify largely excluding 24 percent of the Confederate army from studies about soldiers? No, we desperately need studies on conscripts and substitutes, works that admittedly will have to embrace new approaches due to the lack of traditional diaries and letters written by such men.

Moreover, another 180,000 men, 22.5 percent of all Confederates who served, resisted that well-documented siren call of glory in 1861 long enough that they only enlisted later on in the war.7 With a few exceptions, notably including Chandra Manning’s dissertation,8 the general practice has been either to ignore them or to lump them in with all the others. I chose to do otherwise in my forthcoming work on the men I call “later enlisters.” My sample of 320 of them, all of who enlisted no earlier than January 1862, reveals a mean age of 26, a median age 31, and a modal average age of 19. Counted differently, fifty-nine sampled men were in their teens in 1862, 95 in their twenties, 71 in their thirties, fourteen in their forties, one was in his fifties, and two in their sixties. There are many “oldsters” in this group of “later enlisters,” in other words; three-quarters of my sample are over the age of twenty. In general scholars since Wiley have dismissed them as family men motivated by the threat of conscription, and suggested that they were more likely than earlier recruits to become deserters, cowards, and sneaks.9 Without introducing a distraction or a too-obvious plug, I’ll just say that on all of these points and more my book will often disagree.

There is one last point to raise about Wiley’s “random types.” Having briefly discussed both race and gender—he devotes about a page to women in the ranks such as Malinda Blaylock and Loreta Velasquez—Wiley spends what initially seems a surprising amount of time on class. Indeed class saturates The Life of Johnny Reb. Wiley clearly
was anxious to help dispel what he called “the moonlight-and-magnolias school” and like other historians such as his contemporary Frank Owsley give the sturdy southern yeoman his due. Wiley maintained that a focus on the most literate soldiers, such as those in the Rockbridge Artillery, obscured the bulk of Johnny Rebs “of more ordinary groups [who] either remained silent or wrote volumes of less charm and of a more limited circulation. The result was distortion in favor of the select few.” Many Confederates were in fact illiterate, lost to historians, while more still rested somewhere between the two extremes. Moreover, these common soldiers lived in a world bound by class. Wiley’s favored yeoman soldiers resented planters, abhorred snobs who found their way into the army, and chafed at the discipline of planters and planter-sons turned officers who tried to treat their men as they did their slaves. In turn, in Wiley’s words, “aristocratic privates” warmly disliked “plebian officers.”

Here, scholars generally have not knowingly followed Wiley’s lead. With the exception of the war in Appalachia, where I have argued in the past that it has been used stereotypically and incorrectly, historians of the Civil War soldier largely have studiously avoided introducing much class analysis into their studies, favoring Cold War consensus approaches rather than earlier or subsequent models fueled by conflict. I think that’s a mistake. Surely class is worth exploring; Russell Johnson’s study of Dubuque, Iowa soldiers provides a fascinating if too often ignored model. But another notion worth considering is the extent to which the concerns and conclusions of Progressive historians such as Owsley and Wiley, as well as the latter’s adamant belief in the “sheer courage” of the Confederate soldier and his “greatness as a fighting man,” quietly, just beneath the surface, drive The Life of Johnny Reb in a more agenda-driven direction than we usually
admit. Thinking about class might at least get us thinking about Bell Wiley’s class attitudes and their continuing legacies.\textsuperscript{11}

Ethnicity, age, race, class, gender—all of these familiar concepts seem modern, somehow part of the no longer new “new social history,” yet all can be found to at least a limited extent in the last chapter of *The Life of Johnny Reb*. Perhaps it is time to follow Wiley’s discarded lead, the road not followed, and pursue those “exceptional types.” And then ask ourselves anew “what manner of men” fought for the Confederacy?
Notes


6 Mark A. Weitz, *A Higher Duty: Desertion Among Georgia Troops During the Civil War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000); Mark A. Weitz, *More Damning than Slaughter: Desertion in the Confederate Army* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press,

7 In comparison, the Union army eventually contained 46,000 conscripts and 118,000 substitutes. See McPherson, Ordeal by Fire, 168, 181-82, 357.


