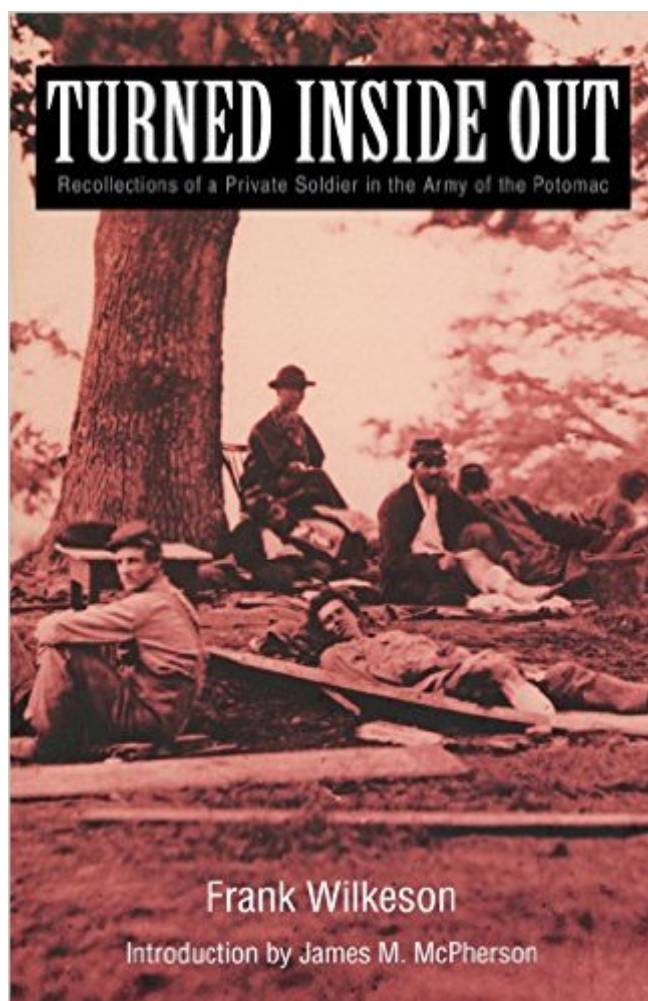


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Turned Inside Out: Recollections Of A Private Soldier In The Army Of The Potomac



Synopsis

This memoir is no misty-eyed bit of nostalgia. Frank Wilkeson writes, he tells us, because "the history of the fighting to suppress the slave holders' rebellion, thus far written, has been the work of commanding generals. The private soldiers who won the battles, and lost them through the ignorance and incapacity of commanders, have scarcely begun to write the history from their point of view." Wilkeson's is a firsthand account of the fumbles and near-cowardice of the commanders, of their squandering of opportunity, materiel, and human life; yet it also portrays foolishness, cupidity, recklessness, and sloth in the ranks. Wilkeson believes stoutly in the virtues of private soldiers who enlisted early in the war; he has a jaundiced eye for the bounty-hunter, conscript, immigrant, and Johnny-come-lately soldiers of the 1864 army. Nor does he cover the battlefield with the haze of glory; he writes frankly and directly of the scenes of death and mutilation, of battlegrounds covered with dead and dying men and animals in the hot summer sun.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Only recently have I come across Frank Wilkeson's grim little book; and I am surprised I had not been made aware of it years before--say, in school. There must be thousands--perhaps tens of thousands--of Civil War memoirs, with few of them being worth more than a cursory skimming. Wilkeson's book goes far beyond this, and deserves to rank as literature. Perhaps its vituperative tone is what has stood in the way of its wider recognition. Frank Wilkeson's father was the noted war correspondent Samuel Wilkeson. His brother Bayard was a 19-year-old artillery lieutenant

whose death on the first day of the Battle of Gettysburg provided him with the cloak of immortality that often is the reward of young lives wasted in battle. Frank, Bayard's younger brother, never says what effect his brother's heroic death had on his decision to join the Army, too; but at 16 he ran away to enlist. He found himself part of a group of a thousand professional bounty-jumpers, a low and besotted crew with whom he was forced to travel into action. Coming from a dutiful and relatively refined family, the discovery that such men existed--and in enormous numbers--must have come as an overwhelming shock to him. Much of the book deals with Wilkeson's service as an artilleryman during some of the fiercest fighting of the war--the Wilderness, Spottsylvania, Petersburg. His descriptions of camp life and of battle, wounds, and death, are graphic and unforgettable.

Frank Wilkeson's memoirs make compelling reading. From the first page to the last, you are swept along with this feisty, spirited young man who wants nothing more than to fight for his bleeding country. I was especially drawn to the quality of his writing. It is clear, vivid, terse, and ironic. At story's end, readers will, indeed, want to know what became of him. I was not surprised to learn that William Dean Howells compared aspects of this book to some of Tolstoy's writings. I especially recommend it for teenagers.

Make no mistake about it; this is one of the best first-person narratives ever written about the Civil War from the viewpoint of a common soldier. Editor James M. McPherson glowingly sings the praises of Frank Wilkeson's manuscript, but he provides no additional details about the life of Wilkeson, something Civil War readers have come to expect when a veteran's manuscript is reprinted. The book is an incredible read, but the reader can't help but ask the question: who was Frank Wilkeson? Where is he buried? What additional details are known about the artillery battery he served in? What was the reaction of readers and veterans when Wilkeson's book was first published? McPherson answers none of these questions in his brief introduction. He only points out that Wilkeson made some mistakes and a few exaggerations in the book, and that historians often quote heavily from it, but that's all. The title of the book was originally: "Recollections of a Private Soldier in the Army of the Potomac," but the publishers, or McPherson himself, have lamely retitled it "Turned Inside Out" - an obscure reference to the pockets of the battlefield dead after they had been looted. I can understand their reasoning for giving the book a shorter and catchier title, but one wonders why they simply didn't shorten Wilkeson's original title to just "A Private Soldier." That would still describe the book in a nutshell. Unfortunately, the new and enigmatic title will doom this

edition to obscurity on the bookstore rack. Wilkerson's narrative is wonderful and I highly recommend it for all types of readers. But the definitive edition of his narrative is yet to be published. I give Wilkerson's narrative 5 stars. I give McPherson's lazy and disappointing scholarship 1 star.

WELL WORTH THE READ !! 1 map. No images. No footnotes. No index. 246 pages. Introduction (5 pgs) by James M. McPherson. A Union soldier's autobiographical memoir written two decades after the Civil War. A zealous, patriotic, under-aged teenager sneaks off to Albany, NY to enlist in the Union Army in late 1863. He reports [and is sworn in 28 Mar 1864]. Frank finds himself in an unimagined army in transition whose replacements and increased manpower is composed of bounty-jumpers, paid substitutes, foreign-born flotsam & jetsam, and uninformed rural Americans. The first two chapters deal with this culture shock and the harsh discipline necessary to transport the unruly, motley crew to the front with the Wilderness as their first battle. Wilkerson leaves his [11th NY Light Artillery] battery and gathers infantry accouterments heading towards the sound of gunfire to fight alongside the infantrymen. The Wilderness was too dense & rugged for artillery to maneuver. Back with his battery, Frank is further seasoned during the morale sapping and heavy combat casualties of the Overland Campaign. (These six chapters provide a ground eye's view of combat and survival unlike the generals' views described in their highly disproportionate Civil War memoirs and histories.) Wilkerson's spirit is fully broken by the costly June 1864 assaults on the Dimmock Line and strong earthworks at Petersburg (Chapter 9). Disillusioned, his anger and disgust torrentially pour out in his most impassioned, climactic chapter addressing the adversely, changed quality of soldiers in the Army of the Potomac; the feckless, poor quality of Union military leadership, and contrasts McClelland and Grant's leading of the Army of the Potomac (Chapter 10). Toning it down a notch, Frank observes and reflects on dying and death in the ranks (Chapter 11). Three anti-climatic chapters conclude this memoir with several observations and reflections --- each worthy of their own discussion. The public and military response to Jubal Early's raid down the Shenandoah Valley northward towards the U.S. capital Washington DC. Rapid deployment to the Federal prison in Elmira, NY, to quell ominous, mutinous threats by Confederate prisoners. (This chapter includes Frank's comparison of perceived prison conditions on both sides.) During the closing chapter describing the odyssey to reach his new artillery assignment as a regular Army 2nd lieutenant, Wilkerson observes and considers the ruinous condition of the mountainous southwestern Confederacy countryside, civilian refugees fleeing

guerrilla warfare, emancipated Negroes groping for an unclear, safe, new place in society, and bushwhackers. Along this journey, Frank pauses to state why he is writing this memoir, e.g. p208. Descriptions of military operations are kept simple and focus on Wilkeson's battery. However, sufficient terrain and military unit information is provided that one could determine just where Frank physically was during these battles if you choose to do so. Frank Wilkeson (b 8 Mar 1848 - d 21 Apr 1913) son of Samuel Wilkeson (a Civil War correspondent for the NY Times) & Catherine Cady (sister of abolitionist & suffragette Elizabeth Cady Stanton). An older brother Bayard (age 19) died while commanding an artillery battery on Barlow's Knoll at the battle of Gettysburg (which their father was covering). His childhood neighbor was 13th U.S. President Millard Fillmore (term 1850-1853). [source: wikipedia]

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