



All's for the Best: The Civil War Reminiscences and Letters of Daniel W. Sawtelle, Eighth Maine Volunteer Infantry (Voices of the Civil War)

Daniel W Sawtelle

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At the outbreak of the Civil War, Daniel Withum Sawtelle was a young man working on his family's farm in the north woods of Maine. The Republican son of a Democrat, he initially took little notice of a war he assumed would be over almost as soon as it started. As the conflict wore on, however, he began to disagree vehemently with his father about the future of the nation. Finally, in February 1862, he enlisted in the Eighth Maine Infantry. Fifty years later, Sawtelle drew on his wartime correspondence to compile a memoir of his experience.

All's for the Best combines Sawtelle's memoir with the most interesting of his letters, which were principally written to his sister Sophronia. His account supplies firsthand descriptions of several important campaigns, from Petersburg -- where Sawtelle volunteered as a sharpshooter -- to Appomattox, as well as several obscure skirmishes. Perhaps the greatest contribution of Sawtelle's writings, however, is the light they shed on the racial attitudes of Union soldiers. In late March 1863, the Eighth Maine occupied Jacksonville, Florida, becoming one of the first all-white units to serve, albeit briefly, with an African American regiment. Although Sawtelle became an increasingly ardent abolitionist, he was not immune to prejudice and expressed decidedly mixed feelings about African Americans.

Sawtelle's military service left him utterly fascinated with the South, and his memoir records his impressions of everything from the flora and fauna to the food and cultures (both white and black) he encountered there. While serving out his last term of enlistment, he remained in the region for nine months following the war's end, and his account of the occupation that preceded Reconstruction makes for compelling reading.

With its careful descriptions and wide-ranging observations, All's for the Best is a valuable contribution to the eyewitness literature of the Civil War.

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