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## **BROWN THE POET**

**by Mark H. Dunkelman**

Poetry may seldom be employed by the average person as a literary form today, but the sentimental Victorians of the Civil War era were avid versifiers. Newspapers of the 1860s often published poems, which were frequently clipped by readers and sent to friends and loved ones. The wives, sisters and sweethearts of Civil War soldiers often composed verses to send to the front, and the soldiers in turn sent their own poems home. One of those soldiers turned his penchant for poetry into a profit-making venture. On at least three occasions, Sergeant James Byron Brown of Company B, 154th New York Volunteers, published his compositions as broadsides and offered them for sale to his comrades. It seems certain that "Brown the poet"--as a fellow member of his company called him--wrote more poetry, and it seems likely that he published other poems, in addition to the three that have been located.

He liked to call himself J. Byron Brown, perhaps fond of the alliteration the combination of his middle and last names provided, perhaps in homage to the late, great Romantic poet. Other than his Civil War service, Brown's life is shrouded in mystery. He claimed Middletown, Vermont as a birthplace, and by the summer of 1862 he was a 25-year-old schoolteacher in western New York. On July 28 Brown enlisted at Perrysburg, Cattaraugus County, New York, to serve three years. That same day he and the recruiter came across an acquaintance of Brown's, Emory K. Vosburgh, in the neighboring town of Dayton. Vosburgh and two of his friends joined Brown and enrolled, and the young men eventually traveled to Jamestown, New York, the rendezvous of their newly-forming regiment.

Brown and his friends were quartered in barracks at Camp James M. Brown in Jamestown, on what had been a fairground. (The camp was named in honor of the martyred colonel of the 100th New York--not a known relation to J. Byron Brown--who had been killed in action at the Battle of Fair Oaks.) At Camp Brown, Byron Brown published his first poem, "The Soldier's Farewell," dated September 7, 1862. It was an acrostic--the first letters of the lines read "Written in Camp J M Brown." The poem expressed the determination of the volunteers to suppress the rebellion, a theme Brown returned to in his second known work, "Army Song," dated September 18, 1862. The poet shrewdly published two versions of that effort. Eight companies of the 154th New York came from Cattaraugus County, the other two were from Chautauqua County. So with the typesetter making two simple substitutions--one in the title and another in the second line--Brown was able to offer his comrades either "Army Song of the Cattaraugus Boys" or "Army Song of the Chautauqua Boys," depending on where they were from.

Brown's work apparently inspired imitators at Camp Brown. Another member of his company, Private Andrew G. Park, published a poem called "The Brave Soldier," dated September 23, 1862. Park's effort cleverly allowed a purchaser of the broadside to personalize it for its intended recipient by filling in two blanks. It was "Written expressly for ..... by Andrew G. Park, of Co. B, 154th Regt. N.Y.S.V.," and the first lines read:

Now, my dear ....., I am far away,

To fight for my country; how long shall I stay?

An undated poem, "The Friends I Left Behind Me!", was published as stationery by Second Lieutenant Philander W. Hubbard of Company K. Hubbard's verses, like those of Brown and Park, combined vows to crush the rebellion with thoughts of the folks at home.

Sergeant Brown and the rest of Company B were mustered in on September 24, 1862, and were soon at the seat of war in Virginia. The poet did not last long at the front, however, and never fired a round at the enemy. On November 17, 1862, Brown left the 154th New York, never to return to the regiment. He was ill with an unknown ailment, and he was sent to a general hospital. By December 22, 1862, he was employed as a nurse at Campbell General

Hospital, on 7th Street outside of Washington, near the Soldier's Home. In January 1863 Brown found time to visit his friend, Corporal Emory Vosburgh, who was delirious with typhoid fever at Harewood Hospital in Washington. After Vosburgh died on January 24, Brown sent an obituary of his friend to the *Jamestown Journal*--his only known published prose piece.

By the spring of 1863, Brown was doing duty as a clerk at the Convalescent Camp at Alexandria, Virginia. By that time, for an unknown reason, he had been reduced to the ranks. Aside from a couple of furloughs in the fall of 1863, Private Brown was on duty at the Convalescent Camp until early in 1864, when he became a clerk at Augur General Hospital near Alexandria. A muster roll at Augur listed him as unfit for active field service; he was "two-thirds disabled," with "ozena" and deformed feet. From May 10, 1864, Brown was assigned to detached service at Washington, apparently as a clerk in the Adjutant General's Office. Early in June he was granted a twenty days leave to meet friends at Newport, Rhode Island on their arrival from Beaufort, South Carolina. On July 29, 1864, Private J. Byron Brown was discharged at Augur General Hospital on a surgeon's certificate of disability, by reason of his deformed feet. A note on his discharge stated, "The Soldier desires to be addressed at Newport, RI"--but no record of him has been found in Rhode Island, or anyplace else. Brown never filed for a pension, and disappeared from the public record.

Before he vanished, he left another poem, "Our Banner," an undated piece published in Philadelphia. Another acrostic, this paean to the Star Spangled Banner spelled out "Harewood Hospital." While there is no evidence Brown was ever a patient or worker at Harewood, he had visited his friend Emory Vosburgh there--so he knew there was a ready-made clientele for his poem. "Our Banner" included some nice graphic and typographic touches, and was Brown's handsomest publication.

Perhaps someday more of J. Byron Brown's published poems will be located, and some clues will surface revealing what happened to him after the war. It's enticing to think he adopted a nom de plume and went on to become a celebrated poet--but his surviving verses tend to negate that idea.

**The End.**

**Illustrations, Captions and Credits.**

1. Sergeant James Byron Brown. Note his initials attached to the chinstrap of his cap. Carte de visite by John C. Gray, Jamestown, New York, courtesy of Charles A. Markham.
2. "The Soldier's Farewell." Courtesy of the USAMHI.
3. "Army Song of the Chautauqua Boys." Courtesy of the Reed Library, State University of New York College at Fredonia.
4. "Our Banner." Courtesy of Michael J. Winey.