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Behind Stars and Bars

Two Yankee reporters spent 19 months in six of the Confederacy's grimmest prisons before escaping across 200 miles of rebel territory.

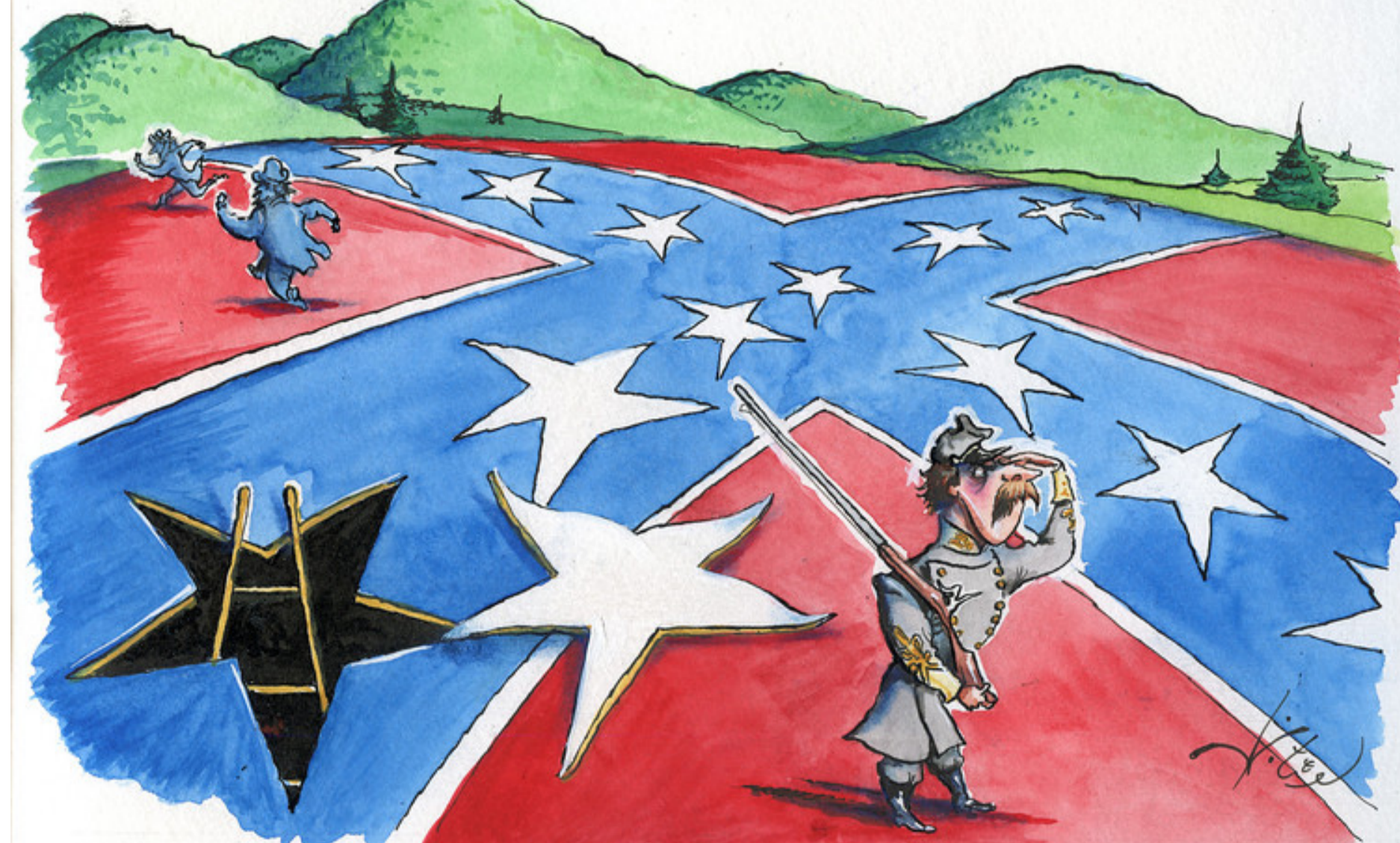
By Edward Kosner
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One moment, Junius Browne and Albert Richardson were floating down the Mississippi on the moonlit night of May 3, 1863, clinging to sodden bales of hay. They had just leapt from a barge heading for a rendezvous with Union forces outside Vicksburg as Confederate cannoners rained fiery shells on them from the shore. The next moment, rebels in rowboats yanked them from the river and took them prisoner.

JUNIUS AND ALBERT'S ADVENTURES IN THE CONFEDERACY

By Peter Carlson
PublicAffairs, 268 pages \$26.99



MICHAEL WITTE

How two young reporters for Horace Greeley's arch-abolitionist New York Tribune found themselves captives of the Confederacy, how they survived some of the most atrocious Southern prisons—and how they escaped and trekked 200 miles to freedom through enemy territory are the subject of Peter Carlson's engaging "Junius and Albert's Adventures in the Confederacy."

It's hard to believe that anything compelling about the Civil War remains unexplored, but the picaresque odyssey of these two plucky journalists turns out to be an intimate and absorbing social history of the rarely glimpsed backwoods of the great conflict.

Both just 29, Browne, a wispy, baldish aesthete who had never met a sentence he couldn't overwrite, and Richardson, a natural reporter and plain writer, were already veteran Civil War correspondents. Browne was as intrepid as his sturdier partner but more prone to the journalistic foibles of the day. After the 1862 Union victory at Fort Donelson in Tennessee, he rhapsodized: "Many a proud warrior heard that glorious shout as his senses reeled in death and his spirit went forth embalmed with the assurance that he had not fallen in vain." Scooped by the rival New York Herald on the later Battle of Pea Ridge, Browne simply invented his account—and the Times of London proclaimed it the best battle story of the war.

Browne and Richardson had come to Vicksburg to cover U.S. Grant's drive to capture the city, command the river, and split Texas, Louisiana and Arkansas from the rest of the Confederacy. Instead, the reporters wound up in a succession of six rebel prisons, each more terrible than the last.

They had almost immediately been "paroled" by the rebs—made eligible to be swapped for Union POWs—but Grant suspended the prisoner exchanges, and so they languished. The rebels hated Greeley's anti-slavery Tribune and were merciless to its reporters. President Abraham Lincoln personally instructed the Union chief of prisoner exchange to get them out—only to have his Confederate counterpart, Robert Ould, denounce the pair as "the worst and most obnoxious of all non-combatants." Ould, in fact, emerges as a vindictive Javert to the miserable Browne and Richardson, endlessly thwarting their hopes for freedom while sending other prisoners north without a murmur.

Browne and Richardson spent three months in Richmond's Libby Prison, where their main activity was picking lice from their tattered clothing. The converted warehouse was so overcrowded that ranks of men slept on their sides, packed together back to belly. Periodically the cry "spoon over to the right" would be heard, and the rows of prisoners would execute a synchronized turn to the other flank. When Grant finally captured Vicksburg on July 4, 1863, the captives and their comrades celebrated by singing the new lyrics by Julia Ward Howe to "John Brown's Body" that transformed it into "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

Then they were transferred up the road to the dread Castle Thunder, whose commandant was the black-clad Capt. George Washington Alexander, a playwright, poet, songwriter, actor, convicted pirate and escaped convict. Officers had been the men's fellow prisoners at Libby, but Browne and Richardson had to share Castle Thunder with Confederate deserters, cutthroats and other criminals.

Proud scamsters delighted in explaining to the reporters the nuances of "running a kink"—stealing a slave and selling him to another owner—and the more intricate "shoving a mick." This involved, Mr. Carlson writes, "finding a rich man willing to pay serious money to hire a substitute to take his place in the army, then getting an ignorant Irishman drunk enough to agree to enlist for far less than the rich guy had promised—and, of course, pocketing the difference." As at Libby, the guards and other prison workers, slave and white, could readily be bribed to smuggle in food, firewood, sticks of furniture and other needs and to smuggle out prisoners. To keep the trade going, the authorities allowed the inmates to get mail from the north, often containing greenbacks.

Browne and Richardson duly tried to escape but botched it. Capt. Alexander was more bemused than offended. "It's your duty to escape if you can," he told them, "and my duty to keep you if I can"—and sentenced them to 10 days in the dungeon.

But worse was to come. The pair's last stop was Salisbury Prison in western North Carolina, a smaller version of the infamous Andersonville, where the rebels held 33,000 captives in horrendous conditions. Salisbury had 800 inmates until the Confederacy flooded it with 9,000 Chinese prisoners, most of them consigned to flimsy tents or holes in the ground covered with torn canvas.

The prisoners were fed a small loaf of cornbread and a cup of gruel each day, when they were fed at all. One lucky prisoner caught a mouse, boiled it and feasted on rodent soup. Diarrhea and pneumonia were rampant, along with typhoid, smallpox and dengue fever. Thirty men succumbed each day, their corpses pitched onto the "dead cart" and dumped in mass graves.

Browne and Richardson were allowed to live in a top-floor room in a prison building and devoted themselves to helping the suffering inmates. Richardson worked as clerk of the prison hospital, and Browne dispensed medicine to the dying men in the stockade. Certain now that the Confederates would never exchange them, the two men hatched a desperate escape plan with the help of a rebel officer who was a member of the Heroes of America, a secret clutch of Union sympathizers. At dusk one day, they flashed a work pass at the stockade sentries and simply strolled away into the woods. They had been guests of the Confederacy for 19 months and 14 days.

Then their true ordeal began—and with it opens the most remarkable part of Mr. Carlson's story. The fugitives—three other escapees had joined Browne and Richardson—now had to cover more than 200 miles of rebel territory to reach the closest Union force near Knoxville, Tenn. It was winter, and they were hungry, penniless, raggedly clothed and badly shod. Confederate regulars, bloodthirsty bushwhackers and the snow-cloaked Blue Ridge Mountains stood between them and sanctuary. As the freezing rain poured down one night, Browne thought of the lines from "King Lear"—"Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are"—and plodded on.

Over the next four weeks, the party stumbled west, traveling only at night, keeping to the woods, slogging through thigh-high snow drifts. Time and again, field slaves, risking flogging or worse, took them into their spare cabins, warmed them by the fire, fed them pork and cornbread, and sent them on their way. White women whose husbands and sons—"outliers"—were hiding in the bush to avoid the Confederate draft concealed them in barns and corncribs until the coast was clear. Here the escapees benefited from a central contradiction plaguing the Confederacy: Poor Appalachian whites resented having to fight to preserve the slavocracy of the rich coastal planters and were happy to help fugitive Yankees.

Eventually, the party hooked up in east Tennessee with the Old Red Fox, a legendary mountain man named Dan Ellis, the "Union pilot" who made two dozen trips guiding packs of men to the blue army. At one point, they were joined by a beautiful teenager named Malvina Stephens, a fearless horsewoman who led them past an especially dangerous spot.

On Jan. 13, 1865, Richardson reached Knoxville and immediately called Greeley: "Separated from the jaws of Death; out of the mouth of Hell." The next day, Browne, who had become part of his companion along the way, arrived at the Union lines. When the Tribune reported the safe return of its heroic correspondents, Greeley managed to misspell both Junius Browne's first and last names.

Both men soon wrote long accounts of their adventures for the paper and later published best-selling books, on which Mr. Carlson has drawn for his own account. Browne married and had a full career as a newspaper editor, magazine writer and author before his death in 1902. Richardson embarked on a long lecture tour, in part to ease the torment of the death of his wife and one of his four children during his captivity, and became one of the most celebrated journalists of his day.

In 1867, Richardson fell in love with a beautiful poet and actress named Abby Sage McFarland, who had just left her husband Daniel, a drunken lawyer. A month later, Daniel McFarland accosted the couple outside a theater, shouted "Libertine!" at Richardson and shot him in the thigh. Abby spent the next year in Indiana getting a divorce to marry Richardson. Before she could, McFarland showed up at the Tribune offices and shot Richardson again, this time mortally wounding him.

On his deathbed, with Junius Browne and his wife at his side, Richardson was married to his love by Henry Ward Beecher, the abolitionist minister. The survivor of one of the great adventures of the Civil War died two days later—at 36, the victim of a besotted ex-husband.

—Mr. Kosner is the author of "It's News to Me," a memoir of his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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