

Steve Earle & Ben McCulloch:

Some Honesty in Lyrics

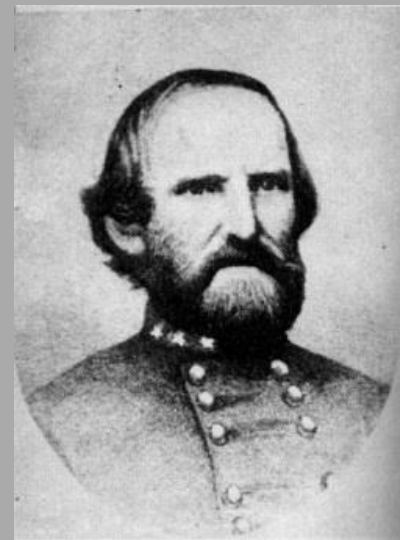
In 1995, a while before I started paying much attention to the Civil War, Steve Earle released an acoustic album, "Train a Comin'," that rightfully won a Grammy. His sidemen were three outstanding musicians, Peter Rowan, Norman Blake, and the late Roy Huskey, and as a special bonus, Emmylou Harris lent her extraordinary talents to sing harmony on a couple of the songs. Although the album is almost two decades old, it remains one of my all time favorites.

Earle is not one of your peaches-and-cream song writers who like to put a romantic spin on life's little travails and pitfalls. Instead many of his songs are dark and gloomy: For instance one of the songs on "Train a Comin'" is a Towns Van Zandt piece called "Tecumseh Valley" about a miner's daughter who "turned to whorin' out on the streets" before freezing to death down some stairs that led to her previous place of employment. Perhaps not for the squeamish.

So when I heard Earle's song "Ben McCulloch" I was impressed by the construction of the tune and by the powerful lyrics but wasn't at all certain whether the song was about a real person or whether the events described in the song were reasonably accurate. The song's narrator is one of two brothers who joined up "To fight with Ben McCulloch and the Texas infantry" on the promise to "get a uniform and seven bucks a week, the best rations in the army and a rifle we could keep."

The narrator tells us how impressed he was with McCulloch because he knew he "was a fightin' man, He was every inch a soldier every word was his command." McCulloch marched his army to Wilson's Creek where they beat the Yankees but where the narrator also saw his brother die.

While marching south toward Arkansas the narrator deserts before hearing that the Rebels lost at Pea Ridge where McCulloch was killed. The narrator's bitterness is amply expressed in the chorus: "Goddamn you Ben McCulloch, I hate you more than any man alive. And when you die you'll be a foot soldier just like me in the devil's infantry." Hardly a romantic Currier & Ives vision of the soldiers' life in or attitude during the Civil War.



Benjamin McCulloch

We don't know about the song's narrator but Ben McCulloch was a real historical person, some might even argue one of the most famous men in the nation prior to the Civil War. Among other things he had been a part time soldier, a Texas Ranger, and a U.S. Marshal, all of which is detailed in an extensive Wikipedia article about his life.

But the most fun for a Civil War buff is to find via Google, raise, and enjoy a Motley Moose article titled "Glory in Doom: Steve Earle, Ben McCulloch, and the Battle of Pea Ridge." Not only is the article good

history with several maps about a portion of the Civil War that many of us, including yours truly, tend to overlook, but the article also provides a mostly favorable, in depth critique about Earle's rendition of that facet of history.

Ben McCulloch died too soon to have much impact upon the Civil War but Steve Earle continues to tour, even appearing occasionally in this area. Of course not every Johnnie Reb or Billy Yank felt the same way as does Earle's narrator, but at least he reminds us of the disillusionment, dread, and despair that at least some soldiers of any war often feel.