

***The McClelland Civil War Letters: A Pittsburgh Family from 1861 to 1865***

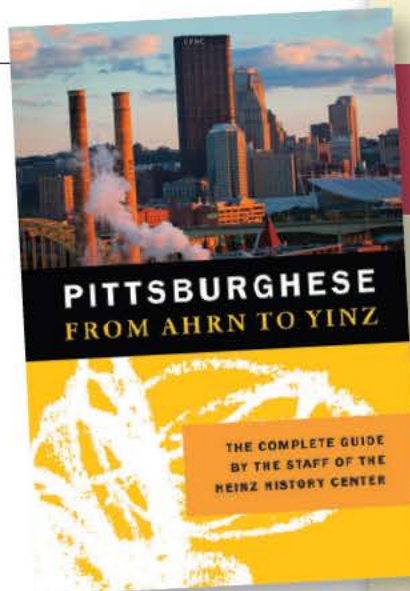
By Betty Bettencourt Dodds  
Dog Ear Publishing: Indianapolis, 2014  
348 pp., b&w photos  
Paperback, \$19.95

Reviewed by Carrie Hadley, Cataloger, Heinz History Center

Betty Bettencourt Dodds's *The McClelland Civil War Letters: A Pittsburgh Family from 1861 to 1865* is a fascinating account of the personal experiences of a Civil War-era family from our city. The two oldest sons in the McClelland family—22-year-old Tom, who traveled west to the future territory of Arizona with the Sonora Exploring and Mining Company in early 1861, and 19-year-old John, who enlisted in the Union Army as a private with the Hampton Battery F Independent Pennsylvania Light Artillery—are the two main letter-writers. Dodds includes a few letters written by their parents, James (an Irish immigrant and business owner) and Elizabeth Black McClelland. Most of the topics of discussion, however, have to be gleaned from

the young men's correspondence with their parents or younger siblings at their home in Pittsburgh's Lower Hill District.

Dodds has academic credentials, with a doctorate from Brigham Young University, but this text is a very accessible and interesting read for those of any background. Her interest and subsequent spotlight on this family is understandable. The letters of Tom and John McClelland offer a unique perspective on life in Civil War-era Pittsburgh, the West, and the country in general, and their accounts of these experiences are incredibly valuable. Dodds explains that she stumbled upon the letters while doing research in the Heinz History Center Detre Library & Archives, and initially took a keen interest in Tom McClelland's story. (Dodds even wrote an article, "I Do Not Believe I Was Born To Be Shot By An Indian," published in the Spring 2011 edition of *Western Pennsylvania History Magazine*, that focuses specifically on Tom McClelland's experience.)



## Preview

***Pittsburghese: From Ahrn to Yinz***

By the Staff of the Heinz History Center  
Paperback, \$6.99

Available now in the History Center  
gift shop and online at:

<http://shop.heinzhistorycenter.org/products/pittsburghese-from-ahrn-to-yinz>

One of the most distinctive features of Western Pennsylvania is the widespread use of a dialect that we have come to call Pittsburghese. It is not just a peculiar local slang Pittsburghers use, but consists of a unique vocabulary and manner of speaking that has been studied by scholars. Linguists have noted that many of our fascinating words and phrases like "redd up" and "nebbly" came to the area with the Scots-Irish in the 1700s. Yet, over 200 years later, it continues to be the dialect that colors the way many of us speak in present-day Pittsburgh and its surrounding areas.

In this complete guide, readers will find history and humor in every word's definition and context sentence. For the more challenging words there is a handy pronunciation guide included as well. While reading this book you may laugh out loud, feel a sense of pride, or maybe a bit of guilt when you realize you or someone you know uses any of these words in their regular vocabulary. If you can relate to this dialect or are curious about where some of your favorite Pittsburghese words come from, you are probably from Pittsburgh and should own this book as a keepsake. It can even be shared with out-of-town guests so they can understand what you mean when you ask, "jeetjet?"



# BOOK REVIEWS

Dodds has transcribed the letters she chose—those “that provide interesting detail”—and she provides helpful context for many of the specific events taking place or people being discussed in the letters, as well as general context for what is happening throughout the country at the time. As someone unfamiliar with the events taking place in the Southwest territories during the Civil War era, this was particularly helpful with Tom’s letters. Her summaries of Civil War battles in conjunction with John’s letters tell the reader just what he or she needs to know in regards to the letter and are not heavy with analysis—she even admits in her introduction that presenting “a history of the Civil War” is not the intention of this book. In this vein, someone more familiar with the battles and generals may have an easier time following John McClelland’s analysis and experience in battle.

This book stands as a rich example of the human element of this tumultuous period in American history. In contrast to many Civil War books that discuss battle tactics and generals, this compilation of letters provides insight into the minds of everyday citizens and their first-hand experiences. These letters are filled with anxiety over loved ones in harm’s way, impatience over a slow mail system, heartbreak over the death of a loved one, and hopes and dreams for the future. They are also filled with interesting cultural and social references, such as famous songs and books of the time, what types of food soldiers could

expect to receive in care packages sent by their families, and, naturally, inquiries into the status of single, young Pittsburgh ladies. To Civil War enthusiasts, John McClelland’s perspective on his superiors and his accounts of major battles such as Fredericksburg and Gettysburg are fascinating. His companionship with his adopted dog, Shell, is particularly charming. Tom McClelland’s letters are a stark reminder of how dangerous and unpredictable life out West actually was.

This text only discusses one Northern, white, middle class family, and the author states that the letters presented were chosen primarily for their content; this is not to be taken as a general Civil War experience. However, the value and relevance of studying accounts like these are evident through the emotional connections to the past and can bring an entirely new perspective to students of the war. Today, we know how this period in American history unfolded. We know the names of key people, the outcomes of battles, and how the war affected the course of history. To see the war from the vantage point of a few everyday people who were unaware of the final outcome, of when they would see their family again, or if they would survive the next battle or round of disease, is a perspective that is invaluable to the study of a war that many thought they knew. ✪



## Spring Books in the 'Burgh Events

### *Pittsburgh Toy Innovation: Then & Now*

Thursday, April 21, 2016 • 7:00–8:30 p.m.

History Center, Detre Library & Archives

A talk about Pittsburgh toy innovation with Terry Mowrey, author of *Wolverine Mechanical Toys: A Collector's Journal*, and Alysia Finger, founder of smart toy company AE Dreams.

### *Swing* by Philip Beard

Thursday, May 12, 2016 • 7:00–8:30 p.m.

History Center, Detre Library & Archives

Reading, discussion, and book signing with author Philip Beard.

Both events are free and open to the public but do not include admission to the rest of the museum.

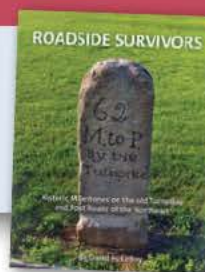
For more information, please contact Caroline Fitzgerald at [ccfitzgerald@heinzhistorycenter.org](mailto:ccfitzgerald@heinzhistorycenter.org) or 412-454-6373.

Look for more reviews at [www.heinzhistorycenter.org/blog/category/online-book-reviews](http://www.heinzhistorycenter.org/blog/category/online-book-reviews)

NEW  
ONLINE



*The Forgotten Flapper*



*Roadside Survivors*