

**THE MEXICAN
WAR DIARY
OF GEORGE B.
McCLELLAN**

PREFACE

During the past four or five years I have been preparing a life of General McClellan in which I plan especially to stress the political influences behind the military operations of the first two years of the Civil War. The main source for my study has been the large collection of "McClellan Papers" in the Library of Congress at Washington, most of which hitherto never has been published. In this collection is the manuscript Mexican War diary and by the courteous permission and kind cooperation of General McClellan's son, Professor George B. McClellan of Princeton University, I have been able to make the following copy. I desire to thank Professor McClellan for other valuable help, including the use of the daguerreotype from which the accompanying frontispiece was made. My thanks also are due Professor Dana C. Munro for his timely advice and valued assistance in the preparation of the manuscript for the press. The map is reproduced from the "Life and Letters of General George Gordon Meade," with the kind permission of the publishers, Charles Scribner's Sons.

It has seemed to me that this diary should prove to be of special value at the present time, for it throws additional light upon the failure of our time honored "volunteer system" and forecasts its utter futility as an adequate defense in a time of national crisis or danger.

WM. STARR MYERS.

Princeton, N. J.
January 3, 1917.

INTRODUCTION

George Brinton McClellan was born in Philadelphia, Pa., on December 3, 1826. He died in Orange, N. J., on October 29, 1885. His life covered barely fifty-nine years, his services of national prominence only eighteen months, but during this time he experienced such extremes of good and ill fortune, of success and of failure, as seldom have fallen to the lot of one man.

While still a small boy McClellan entered a school in Philadelphia which was conducted by Mr. Sears Cook Walker, a graduate of Harvard, and remained there for four years. He later was a pupil in the preparatory school of the University of Pennsylvania, under the charge of Dr. Samuel Crawford. McClellan at the same time received private tuition in Greek and Latin from a German teacher named Scheffer and entered the University itself in 1840. He remained there as a student for only two years, for in 1842 he received an appointment to the United States Military Academy at West Point.

McClellan graduated from West Point second in his class in the summer of 1846 and was commissioned a brevet second lieutenant of engineers. On July 9 Colonel Joseph G. Totten, Chief of Engineers, ordered McClellan to “repair to West Point” for duty with the company of engineers then being organized by Captain A. J. Swift and Lieutenant Gustavus W. Smith. The Mexican War had begun during the preceding May and the young graduate of West Point was filled with delight at the new opportunity for winning reputation and rank in his chosen profession. The company of

engineers was ordered to Mexico and left for the front during the month of September.

The diary that follows begins with the departure from West Point and continues the narrative of McClellan's experiences through the battle of Cerro Gordo in April, 1847. It ends at this point, except for a line or two jotted down later on in moments of impatience or ennui.

To the student of McClellan's life this diary presents certain striking contrasts in character between the youthful soldier, not yet twenty years of age, and the general or politician of fifteen or twenty years later. At this time McClellan was by nature happy-go-lucky, joyous, carefree, and almost irresponsible. In after years he became extremely serious, deeply and sincerely religious, sometimes oppressed by a sense of duty. And yet at this early age we can plainly discern many of the traits that stand out so prominently in his mature life. He was in a way one of the worst subordinates and best superiors that ever lived. As a subordinate he was restless, critical, often ill at ease. He seemed to have the proverbial "chip" always on his shoulder and knew that his commanding officers would go out of their way to knock it off; or else he imagined it, which amounted to the same thing. As a commanding officer he always was thoughtful, considerate and deeply sympathetic with his men, and they knew this and loved him for it.

These same traits perhaps will explain much of the friction during the early years of the Civil War between McClellan and Lincoln and also the devotion that reached almost to adoration which the soldiers of the Army of the Potomac showed for their beloved commander. And McClellan had many intimate friends, friends of

high character, who stood by him through thick and thin until the very day of his death. This relationship could not have continued strong to the last had he not in some measure deserved it. His integrity, his inherent truthfulness and sense of honor, stood out predominant.

McClellan could write. In fact his pen was too ready and in later years it often led him into difficulties. He had a keen sense of humor, though it was tempered by too much self-confidence and at times was tinged with conceit. He was proud, ambitious and deeply sensitive. All this appears in the diary, and it will be seen that this little book offers a key to the explanation of much that followed.

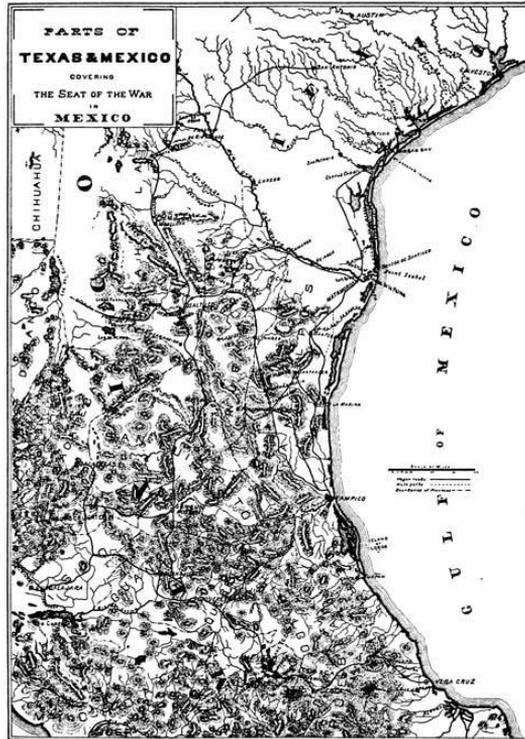
McClellan took a prominent and brilliant part, for so young a man, in the later events of Scott's campaign which ended in the capture of the City of Mexico. He showed himself to be able, brave and extremely skilful. He was promoted to the rank of brevet first lieutenant, August 20, "for gallant and meritorious conduct in the battles of Contreras and Cherubusco," and brevet captain on September 13 for his services at Chapultepec. He was brevetted in addition for Molino del Rey on September 8, and the nomination was confirmed by Congress, but he declined the honor on the ground that he had not taken part in that battle, while this brevet "would also cause him to rank above his commanding officer—Lieut. G. W. Smith—who was present at every action where he was and commanded him." (Ms. letter from McClellan to General R. Jones, Adj. Gen. U. S. A., dated "Washington City, August 1848." *McClellan Papers*, Library of Congress, Vol. I.)

The diary gives a vivid picture of Mexico, the land and its people. Furthermore, there is a fine description of the life of the soldiers on the march, of the siege of Vera Cruz, and of the ill behavior and

lack of discipline of the volunteer forces. The notes will show that General George Gordon Meade, later the Union commander at Gettysburg, also was a lieutenant in Taylor's army, and his estimate of the volunteers agrees in every particular with that mentioned above.

McClellan's career has been the subject of endless controversy, often pursued with such acrimony and gross unfairness that its memory rankles today in the minds of many. Furthermore, upon the outcome of this controversy have depended the reputations of many prominent men, for if McClellan should be proved to have been in the wrong the mantle of greatness still might rest upon the shoulders of certain politicians and generals hitherto adjudged to be "great." On the other hand, if McClellan was in the right, and the present writer believes that in large part he was, then he was a victim of envy and downright falsehood. His name should now be cleared of all unjust accusations, and also history should reverse its judgment of many of his opponents.

WM. STARR MYERS.



**PARTS OF TEXAS & MEXICO COVERING
THE SEAT OF THE WAR
IN MEXICO**

MEXICAN WAR DIARY OF GEORGE B. McCLELLAN 1846-1847

We left West Point on the 24th of September 1846 for General Taylor's army in Mexico—Company "A" Engineers^[1] consisted of Captain [A. J.] Swift, Lieutenant G. W. Smith,^[2] myself and 71 rank and file. On Saturday the 26th we sailed from the Narrows bound to Brazos de Santiago [Texas] where we were so fortunate as to arrive in 14 days. We had a very pleasant passage, on the whole. Felt very much the want of *ice*, and *claret*. At one time could only eat raw tomatoes.

The result of my experience with respect to the transportation of troops by sea is,—

In the first place see that the part of the vessel destined to receive them is thoroughly policed, washed and well scraped out before the vessel sails; then let a strong police party be detailed every day, so that the part between decks may always be well washed out and smell well. Wind-sails are very necessary. The acting commissary of subsistence should see for himself exactly what is put on board for the use of the troops and should cause a written requisition to be made upon him for the quantity used from day to day or week to week. He should have a reliable and intelligent sergeant at his disposal. Care should be taken that good cooking arrangements are provided. Mush appeared to be a favorite and agreeable food for the men at sea. The muskets should be inspected every day, when the weather permits, as also the quarters. Men must be required to

wear their worst clothes (working overalls, etc.) on board. Care should be taken that camp equipage and all articles necessary for immediate use of troops when landed are so stowed that they can be got at at once.

Brazos is probably the very worst port that could be found on the whole American coast. We are encamped on an island which is nothing more than a sand bar, perfectly barren, utterly destitute of any sign of vegetation. It is about six miles long and one-half mile broad. We are placed about one hundred yards from the sea, a row of sand hills some twenty feet high intervening. Whenever a strong breeze blows the sand flies along in perfect clouds, filling your tent, eyes and everything else. To dry ink you have merely to dip your paper in the sand. The only good thing about the place is the bathing in the surf. The water which we drink is obtained by digging a hole large enough to contain a barrel. In this is placed a bottomless barrel in which the water collects. You must dig until you find water, then "work-in" the barrel until it is well down. This water is very bad. It is brackish and unhealthy. The island is often overflowed to the depth of one or two feet. To reach this interesting spot, one is taken from the vessel in a steamboat and taken over a bar on which the water is six feet deep, and where the surf breaks with the greatest violence. It is often impossible to communicate with the vessels outside for ten days or two weeks at a time.

We have been here since Monday afternoon and it is now Friday. We expect to march for the mouth of the Rio Grande tomorrow morning at break of day—thence by steamboat to Matamoros where we will remain until our arrangements for the pontoon train are complete. We received when we arrived the news of the battle of Monterey. Three officers who were present dined with us

today—Nichols of the 2nd Artillery, Captain Smith (brother of G. W. Smith) formerly Captain of Louisiana Volunteers now an amateur, Captain Crump of the Mississippi Volunteers—fine fellows all. Saw Bailie Peyton and some others pass our encampment this morning from Monterey. I am now writing in the guard tent (I go on guard every other day). Immediately in front are sand hills, same on the right, same in the rear, sandy plain on the left. To the left of the sand hills in front are a number of wagons parked, to the left of them a pound containing about 200 mules, to the left and in front of that about fifty sloops, schooners, brigs and steamboats; to the left of that and three miles from us may be seen Point Isabel.

Camp opposite Camargo,^[3] November 15th, 1846. We marched from Brazos to the mouth of the Rio Grande and on arriving there found ourselves without tents, provisions or working utensils, a cold Norther blowing all the time. We, however, procured what we needed from the Quarter Master and made the men comfortable until the arrival of Captain Swift with the wagons, who reached the mouth late in the afternoon, whilst we got there about 10 A. M. Thanks to Churchill's kindness G. W. Smith and myself got along very well. We left in the Corvette the next morning (Sunday) for Matamoros, where we arrived at about 5 P. M. The Rio Grande is a very narrow, muddy stream. The channel is very uncertain, changing from day to day. The banks are covered with the mesquite trees, canes, cabbage trees, etc. The ranches are rather sparse, but some of them are very prettily situated. They all consist of miserable huts built of mesquite logs and canes placed upright—the interstices filled with mud. The roofs are thatched, either with canes or the leaves of the cabbage tree (a species of palmetto). Cotton appears to grow quite plentifully on the banks, but is not

cultivated at all. The Mexicans appear to cultivate nothing whatever but a little Indian corn (maize). They are certainly the laziest people in existence—living in a rich and fertile country (the banks of the river at least) they are content to roll in the mud, eat their horrible beef and tortillas and dance all night at their fandangos. This appears to be the character of the Mexicans as far as I have seen, but they will probably improve as we proceed further in the country.

Matamoros is situated about a quarter mile from the river. Some of the houses on the principal streets are of stone, there is one near the Plaza built in the American style with three stories and garrets. All the rest are regular Mexican. On the Plaza is an unfinished cathedral, commenced on a grand scale, but unfinished from a want of funds. The great majority of the houses are of log. The place is quite Americanized by our army and the usual train of sutlers, etc., etc.,—you can get almost everything you want there. We were encamped near the landing. I rode over to Resaca and Palo Alto, but as there is just now a prospect of our returning to Matamoros, before moving on Tampico, I shall write no description of the fields until I have visited them again. After being sick for nearly two weeks in Matamoros I left with the company for Camargo on the “Whiteville,” where we arrived two weeks ago tomorrow, and I have been in Hospital Quarters ever since until day before yesterday.^[4]

Now I am in camp, the wind blowing the dust in such perfect clouds that it is perfectly horrible—one can hardly live through it. My quarters in Camargo were the *Palace* of Don Jesus, the brother of the Alcalde [Mayor of the town]—he (the Don) having absquatatated [sic]. The main body of the *Palace* (!) is one storied. It consists of two rooms—the smaller one occupied by Dr. Turner,

the other by “Legs” and myself (together with Jimmie Stuart for a part of the time). The floor is of hard earth, the walls white, and very fancifully decorated with paintings—the roof flat and painted green—an inscription on it showing that “Se acabó [This house was finished] esta casa *entiaso* [this word is not Spanish] Dio[s] &c. &c. 1829.” Altogether it was quite a *recherché* establishment. Jimmie Stuart came down to take care of me when I first got there, and after doing so with his usual kindness was unfortunately taken with a fever, and had to stay there anyhow.^[51]

We are to accompany General Patterson^[6] to Tampico. I hope and suppose that we will have a fight there, then join General Taylor, *then* hey for San Luis [Potosi] and another fight.

December 5th [1846]. Mouth of the Rio Grande. After getting up quite an excitement about a fight at Tampico etc., we were completely floored by the news that the navy had *taken* it without firing a single gun^[7]—the place having been abandoned by the Mexican troops, who are doubtless being concentrated at San Luis Potosi in anticipation of a grand attack on the place—ah! if we only fool them by taking Vera Cruz and its castle, and then march on the capital—we would have them completely. After a great many orders and counter orders we have at length arrived thus far on our way to Tampico. We left Camargo on Sunday evening last (November 29th) in the corvette, with Generals Patterson and Pillow^[8] and a number of other officers (among them Captain Hunter 2nd Dragoons, Major Abercrombie, Captain Winship, Seth Williams,^[9] and about a thousand volunteers). We had decidedly a bad passage—running on sand bars very often—being blown up against a bank by the wind—breaking the rudder twice, etc., etc. We left General P[atterson], Captain Swift and many others at Matamoros. The General started with the intention of going to

Tampico by sea—all the troops (except the Tennessee cavalry) were to go by sea, but at Reinosá an express overtook us ordering the General to proceed by land with all the troops except this company, which *is* to go by sea (!). Captain Swift remained at Matamoros on account of his health.

I was perfectly disgusted coming down the river. I found that every confounded Voluntario in the “Continental Army” ranked me—to be ranked and put aside for a soldier of yesterday, a miserable thing with buttons on it, that knows nothing whatever, is indeed too hard a case. I have pretty much made up my mind that if I cannot increase my *rank* in this war, I shall resign shortly after the close of it. I cannot stand the idea of being a Second Lieutenant all my life. I have learned some valuable lessons in this war. I am (I hope and believe) pretty well cured of castle building. I came down here with high hopes, with pleasing anticipations of distinction, of being in hard fought battles and acquiring a name and reputation as a stepping stone to a still greater eminence in some future and greater war. I felt that if I could have a chance I could do *something*; but what has been the result—the real state of the case? The first thing that greeted my ears upon arriving off Brazos was the news of the battle of Monterey^[10]—the place of all others where this Company and its officers would have had an ample field for distinction. There was a grand miss, but, thank heaven, it could not possibly have been avoided by us. Well, since then we have been dodging about—waiting a week here—two weeks there for the pontoon train—a month in the dirt somewhere else—doing nothing—half the company sick—have been sick myself for more than a month and a half—and here we are going to Tampico. What will be the next thing it is impossible to guess at. We *may* go to San Luis—we *may* go to Vera Cruz—we *may* go home from

Tampico, we *may* see a fight, or a dozen of them—or we may not see a shot fired. I have made up my mind to act the philosopher—to take things as they come and not worry my head about the future—to try to get perfectly well—and above all things to see as much *fun* as I can “scare up” in the country.

I have seen more suffering since I came out here than I could have imagined to exist. It is really awful. I allude to the sufferings of the Volunteers. They literally die like dogs. Were it all known in the States, there would be no more hue and cry against the Army, all would be willing to have so large a regular army that we could dispense entirely with the volunteer system. The suffering among the Regulars is comparatively trifling, for their officers know their duty and take good care of the men.^[11]

I have also come to the conclusion that the Quartermaster's Department is most woefully conducted—never trust anything to that Department which you can do for yourself. If you need horses for your trains, etc., carry them with you. As to provisions (for private use) get as much as possible from the Commissaries—you get things from them at one-half the price you pay sutlers. Smith has ridden over to Brazos de Santiago to endeavor to make arrangements for our immediate transportation to Tampico. Captain Hunter went with him on my mare. They return in the morning. Whilst at Camargo, Smith had a discussion with General Patterson about his (General Patterson's) right to order us when en route to join General Taylor, under orders from Head Quarters at Washington. The General was obliged to succumb and admit the truth of the principle “That an officer of Engineers is not subject to the orders of every superior officer, but only to those of his immediate chief, and that General (or other high officer) to whom he may be ordered to report for duty.”

There goes Gerber with his tattoo—so I must stop for the present.

December 6th [1846]. Go it Weathercocks! Received an order from Major McCall^[12] this morning to go back to Matamoros, as we are to *march* to Tampico, via Victoria, with the column under General Patterson.^[13] Smith is away at Brazos and if the order had been one day and a half later we would have been off to Tampico by sea. Have fine sea bathing here. It is blowing very hard from the south east, so much so as to raise the sand too much for comfort entirely. Bee and Ward at the Brazos—coming over this morning—will at least have an opportunity of giving Georgie that letter of Madame Scott's! I feel pleased at the idea of going by land—we will have a march to talk about, and may very probably have a fight on the way. I firmly believe that we will have a brush before reaching Tampico. Unfortunately the whole column is *Voluntario*.

January 2nd, 1847. Rancho Padillo, on Soto la Marina river. I “firmly believed” we would have a brush!—the devil I did!—and a pretty fool I was to think I'd have such good luck as that. I've given it up entirely. But I was right in the other—the whole column *is* *Voluntario*—and a pretty column it is too. To go on with our affairs.—We reached Matamoros on the 8th [December] and encamped on the river bank just below the Mexican batteries. Smith went down to the mouth [of the river] again to select tools for the march, leaving me in command. After various orders and counter orders we were finally (December 21st) directed to appear upon the Plaza as early as possible in order to march to El Moquete, where General Pillow was encamped with the 3rd and 4th Illinois Volunteers. “Mind, Mr. Smith” said the old Mustang^[14] the night before, “mind and appear as early as possible, so that you may not delay us”—all this with that air of dignity and importance so

peculiarly characteristic of Mustangs; well we got up at daybreak and reached the Plaza a little after seven, immediately reported ourselves ready to start and were informed that we should wait for the guide who was *momentarily* expected. We were to march in advance, then the wagon train, then Gibson with his artillery (a twelve pounder field piece and twenty-four pounder howitzer) was to bring up the rear.

I waited and waited in the hot sun on the Plaza, watched the men gorging themselves with oranges, sausages etc., them took to swearing by way of consolation. When I had succeeded in working myself into a happy frame of mind (about one o'clock) old Abercrombie^[15] ordered Gibson to start in advance and our company to bring up the rear. I wont attempt to describe the beauties of forming a rear guard of a wagon train. Suffice it to say that the men straggled a great deal, some got rather drunk, all very tired. We reached the banks of El Arroyo Tigre about 8 o'clock (two hours after dark) and then encamped as we best could.

I rode on in advance of the company to see El Tigre and found Gibson amusing himself by endeavoring to curse a team (a caisson) across the river, which (the caisson, not the river—well, *both were*, after all) had got mired in the middle. I rode back and met the company about one mile from the camp ground, struggling along—tired to death and straining their eyes to see water through the darkness. I consoled them somewhat by telling them that it was not more than a mile to the water, but they soon found that a mile on foot was a great deal longer than a mile on horseback. However, we got there at last, pitched our camp, and soon forgot all our troubles in sound sleep.

I rode in advance next morning through the long wagon train to find a new ford. We crossed and encamped with General Pillow's Brigade. Went down to Major Harris' (4th Illinois) tent, where I had a fine drink of brandy and the unspeakable satisfaction of seeing a democratic Volunteer Captain (in his shirt sleeves) sit, with the greatest unconcern, on a tent peg for at least an hour. Gibson and I then went to Winship's tent where we found G. W. [Smith] and an invitation to dine with General Pillow.

During dinner it began to rain like bricks. We adjourned to Winship's tent, and the sight we presented would have amused an hermit. The water [was] about an inch deep in the tent, and we four sitting on the bed passing around a tumbler continually replenished from that old keg of commissary whiskey—oh lord! how it did fly 'round! and we were as happy a set of soldiers as ever lived “in spite of wind and weather.” “Whoa Winship,” says Gibson, “that's too strong” so he drank it all to keep us from being injured. Well, we amused ourselves in this way until dark—then we waded back to our respective domiciles (is a tent a domicile?) having previously seen old Patt make his grand entrée in the midst of a hard rain—*he* in Dr. Wright's ^[16] covered wagon (looking for all the world like an old Quaker farmer going to market), his escort and staff dripping with the rain. *We* wondered why they looked so dismal and thought that it had not been such a horrid bad day after all!

This evening G. W. [Smith] and myself had a grand cursing match over an order from the “stable” requiring a detail from our camp to pitch and unpitch the General's tents etc. However, we sent them just about the meanest detail that they ever saw. At this place our large army was divided into two columns. We moved at the head of the first column. General Pillow came on one day after us.

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