

Unpopular Beliefs: Unionist Minister's History Of Wartime Arkansas Returns To Print

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Review

UNPOPULAR BELIEFS

Unionist minister's history of wartime Arkansas returns to print

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Baxter, William and Shea, William L. *Pea Ridge and Prairie Grove: Or, Scenes and Incidents of the War in Arkansas.* University of Arkansas Press, 2000-03-01. ISBN 1557285918

Originally published in 1864, William Baxter's first-hand observations in and around Fayetteville, Arkansas, between 1860 and 1863 now have received a second reprinting in **Pea Ridge and Prairie Grove**. Though he meticulously describes the Confederate troops marching to and from the 1862 battles of Pea Ridge and Prairie Grove, he was not present during the fighting. Indeed, Baxter's account is social rather than military history.

Born in England, Baxter immigrated to the United States with his parents. After graduating from Bethany College in 1845, he devoted himself to teaching and ministering. His profession took him to Pennsylvania, Louisiana, and Mississippi before he arrived in Fayetteville in 1858. There, as president of Arkansas College and the head of a large congregation, his roots spread quickly. Despite his unionist inclination, economics influenced him to remain in the predominantly pro-secessionist community after the outbreak of war.

Fayetteville changed hands six times during the first 18 months of the War. Though he curbed his tongue when discussing politics, Baxter's neighbors knew where he stood. His moderate behavior and befriending of Confederate sympathizers regardless of who held the town made little difference to them. Each time Confederate troops reoccupied the town, life became more precarious for the ever-dwindling number of unionists who remained. The irregular soldiers who traveled the area in bands proved even more dangerous than the occupying troops, and northern troops treated his property almost as badly as the Southerners. Finally, in February 1863, the now-penniless Baxter and his family accompanied a Union wagon train northward.

Once he reached the safety of St. Louis, Baxter began penning this volume. Where other sources exist that relate to the events he recounts, they substantiate his accuracy. Considering what he had endured and his political inclinations, he managed to curb most of his bias. He presents the good and bad of both sides, with Confederate General Benjamin McCulloch portrayed as the most villainous of all. It could hardly be otherwise, since Baxter held him responsible for the wanton destruction of Arkansas College.

William L. Shea's introduction to this edition substantially enhances **Pea Ridge and Prairie Grove's** value. Researchers may be disappointed to find that the University of Arkansas Press did not prepare an index to the volume, and readers will search in vain for a map showing the various towns, roads, and intersections that Baxter mentions in his account. Despite these omissions, Baxter's history is a worthy addition to *The Civil War in the West* series, edited by Anne Bailey and Daniel Sutherland.

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