The Shenandoah Valley Campaign of 1862

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Review

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Through a long lens

Historical distance aids objectivity

In the preface to his biography of the American Revolution's most famous loyalist, Bernard Bailyn describes the evolution of explanations surrounding Thomas Hutchinson (Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson, Harvard University Press, 1976). According to Bailyn, historical explanations go through stages, which reflect the time in which the explanation was written relative to the event in question. The initial explanations following a controversial event are still a significant part of the event itself; emotions are still engaged in large part because the historians involved were quite often part of the event under examination. As a result explanations in this early stage tend toward the heroic and are expressed in moral terms. Only later can the historian hope to capture the chain of events in which the episode is located. As the distance between the historian and the event increases, according to Bailyn, the lack of emotional attachment finally allows for a sympathetic appraisal with all of the relevant historical players and issues. From this vantage point earlier assumptions of relevance, partisan in their nature, seem crude, and fall away, and in their place there comes a neutrality, a comprehensiveness, and a breadth of sympathy lacking in earlier assumptions.

Bailyn's historiographic map can be applied broadly to Civil War studies. Throughout the immediate postwar years, ex-Confederates set the terms for understanding central questions surrounding the Civil War, including its cause, what the war was about, and why the South was not successful in its bid for independence. In addition, specific battles and commanders were emphasized not necessarily for the purposes of getting closer to the truth, but to preserve a sense of meaning that former Confederates could cherish in the face of
overwhelming defeat. In the twentieth century, Progressive and Revisionist historians chipped away at various aspects of the Lost Cause tradition as direct connections with the Civil War widened. Arguably, not until the last few decades have historical explanations of the Civil War arrived at what Bailyn describes as the ultimate mode of interpretation.

Coupled with changes within the historical profession, including the evolution and continued interest in social history, historians are reinterpreting the spectrum of subjects in Civil War history. The *Military Campaigns of the Civil War Series* published by the University of North Carolina Press and edited by Gary W. Gallagher has led the way in challenging scholars and Civil War enthusiasts to rethink the way in which military history is analyzed, including how it intersects with the home front, the economy, and politics. Many of the essays presented through the series forge new ground by deconstructing older interpretations, thus allowing the reader to view more clearly the process by which various subjects were explained. *The Shenandoah Valley Campaign of 1862* is the eighth volume in the series.

Of the eight essays in this collection, only two focuses specifically on topics related to the Union. Readers will be surprised to find that Gallagher authors one of these two essays, since he typically focuses on topics related to the Confederacy. Gallagher examines Abraham Lincoln's concerns as General Thomas Stonewall Jackson's troops advanced down the Valley culminating in the battles of Front Royal and First Winchester. Contrary to many accounts, which portray Abraham Lincoln as timid in the face of a possible Confederate thrust from the Valley towards the capital, Gallagher argues that Lincoln maintained his composure and even hoped to exploit Jackson's presence in the Lower Valley to prod [George] McClellan into action at Richmond. William J. Miller reevaluates the Federal command structure in the Valley and finds that Nathaniel P. Banks, John C. Fremont, and James Shields must be judged within the context of a poorly directed strategic framework and logistical difficulties. From this perspective, Miller concludes that Banks and Fremont deserve some credit for modest accomplishments in bad situations not of their making, particularly in late May and early June. The essays by Gallagher and Miller point in the direction of much needed work in understanding operations in the Shenandoah Valley from the Union point of view.

Three historians focus on the careers and reputations of Confederate officers. Robert K. Krick and Peter S. Carmichl probe the role of memory in
constructing the reputations of Jackson and Turner Ashby respectively. Krick challenges those who would argue that Jackson's reputation was a product of postwar Lost Cause advocates. In arguing this point, Krick probes contemporary sources by soldiers, civilians, and newspaper accounts, which indicate that Jackson's reputation was solidified by June 1862, in large part due to his success in the Valley. The conclusion that Jackson's reputation was articulated during the war dovetails with historians who assert that Lee's reputation was also a product of various conditions throughout the war, and finally with the work of Robert E. Bonner who argues in *Colors and Blood: Flag Passions of the Confederate South* (Princeton University Press, 2002) that the symbolic significance of the Confederate battle flag was also a wartime phenomena.

Peter Carmichl examines Turner Ashby's wartime reputation through the lens of how his contemporaries chose to see him. Ashby's image as an aristocratic cavalier possessed of a devout Christian faith was fabricated after his untimely death during a skirmish near Harrisonburg. Remembering Ashby as the embodiment of chivalry allowed southerners to internalize elements of the Lost Cause: Until recently every generation of white southerners since the war has learned, like some catechism, that all Confederates were gallant and moral, that they fought for a Christian nation, and that they protected the honor of their women against barbaric Yankee hordes. This image of Ashby masked his limited success as an officer, a serious conflict with Jackson, and democratic tendencies. Finally, Robert E.L. Krick offers a concise biographical sketch of Brig. Gen. Charles S. Winder. Winder commanded the Stonewall brigade through much of the Valley campaign and earned the reputation as a strict disciplinarian before his death at Cedar Mountain in August 1862.

Situated fittingly in the middle of this volume is Jonathan M. Berkey's essay on civilians who found themselves caught in the middle between two armies and mixed allegiances within Valley communities. Berkey does a thorough job of accounting for the myriad ways in which military operations impacted Valley residents. Material loss, social upheaval (due primarily to loosening bonds of slavery), and a general sense of uncertainty defined the experiences of many who dealt with constantly shifting armies. Though Confederates succeeded in ridding the Valley of Federal forces, the presence of these armies, according to Berkey, contributed to the disintegration of innumerable Valley households.

Readers interested in military units will find Keith Bohannon's essay on the 12th Georgia Infantry interesting on a number of levels. Bohannon catalogues
the unit's movements, from its unwavering performance at McDowell to its poor showing at Front Royal. At the same time Bohannon compares coverage from newspapers during the spring of 1862, which tended to present information in a way that helped sustain morale on the home front with postwar coverage that selected facts that ignored embarrassing episodes when recording the service of their regiment for posterity. Such an analysis reminds us of the hazards when judging sources.

Finally, A. Cash Koeniger looks at the trial of Brigadier General Richard Brooke Garnett. Garnett's trouble with Jackson stemmed from his decision to withdraw his troops during the battle of Kernstown on March 23, 1862. Jackson relieved Garnett of command and pressed formal charges. Koeniger uses the case to assess Jackson's character, and more specifically his habit of arresting officers. In doing so, Koeniger paints a harsh picture of Jackson who quibbled unnecessarily with officers, which perhaps cost him command of a larger army. Unfortunately, Koeniger does not add much that is new in his assessment of Jackson, though a more thorough analysis of the two officers' respective social and economic backgrounds may have yielded more results.

This is an exceptionally strong collection of essays. They succeed in forcing readers to rethink fundamental assumptions surrounding the Shenandoah Valley campaign of 1862, including how officers and units are assessed, the role and experience of civilians, and the location of the campaign within the larger context of the war as a whole.

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