War and Ruin: William T. Sherman and the Savannah Campaign

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Review

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Bailey, Anne J. War and Ruin: William T. Sherman and the Savannah Campaign. Scholarly Resources, $17.95 ISBN 084202851x

Few deliberate depredations

March to the Sea is reexamined

No amount of objective analysis or careful scrutiny of the historical record will ever redeem Major General William T. Sherman in the eyes of many Southerners. After generations of vilification, Sherman remains a fiend, a brutish example of the worst of the Yankees.

In War and Ruin: William T. Sherman and the Savannah Campaign, author Anne J. Bailey undertakes an objective appraisal of Sherman's famous March to the Sea in order to show that the general committed fewer deliberate depredations during the campaign than is commonly believed. While Bailey succeeds in providing a brisk, concise narrative of the campaign, her efforts to objectify Sherman's deeds will no doubt fail to persuade the legions of Sherman haters, despite her evidence.

Bailey addresses the familiar argument that Sherman was a proponent of total war, a heartless advocate of unmerciful attacks upon every aspect of Confederate life. In fact, readers will be surprised to learn of the many instances in which Sherman spared the homes, communities, and lives of those Southern civilians he encountered in the midst of the Savannah campaign. While there is no doubt of the extensive destruction inflicted by his army during their remarkable march, Bailey makes a compelling argument that Sherman took this action in order to cripple Confederate morale and wreck their fighting spirit. Unlike advocates of total war in the twentieth century, Sherman was not a proponent of the wholesale slaughter of civilians.
Bailey also reveals the heroic but futile efforts of the paltry Confederate forces assembled in Georgia to stop Sherman's overwhelming numbers. Notables such as Joseph Wheeler, William Hardee, and Lafayette McClaws possessed courage and competence in abundance, but with ill-trained militia, emergency recruits, and exhausted cavalry, these Confederate officers could not stop Sherman's army.

The story of the brief but gallant stand of the tiny Confederate garrison at Fort McAllister is a tale that will excite the admiration of any reader. Outnumbered fifteen to one, the garrison refused to surrender, and Sherman was forced to order an assault. At the end of the struggle for the fort, both sides saluted one another’s courage in the fighting.

War and Ruin is a relatively slim volume in comparison to the many tomes written about William Sherman, but Bailey's research and writing are solid and merit scrutiny by all serious students of the American Civil War. Her conclusions will challenge some readers, but such a result is to be desired because it reflects the author's serious approach to scholarship and her personal courage as a writer.

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