

Vicksburg: The Campaign That Opened the Mississippi

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Review

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Ballard, Michael B. *Vicksburg: The Campaign That Opened the Mississippi*.
The University of North Carolina Press, \$39.95 ISBN 807828939

Vital Vicksburg

A study of the complex campaign

Vicksburg is fresh, powerful, and authoritative. Michl Ballard is at his best and demonstrates why he is one of the few historians who can truly claim mastery of the complexities that make the Vicksburg campaign so daunting a study. Through release of this volume, the author enhances a well-earned reputation for his dogged tenacity as a researcher and excellence as a writer. By ferreting out scores of never before used sources coupled with expert analysis, Ballard has produced a volume that provides a crisp, clear read and will intrigue even the most discerning student of the Civil War.

In addition to *A Long Shadow: Jefferson Davis and the Final Days of the Confederacy*, Ballard is the author of *Pemberton: A Biography* and *U. S. Grant: The Making of a General, 1861-1863*. Having penned biographies on the Vicksburg drama's two leading actors, Confederate Lt. Gen. John C. Pemberton and Union Maj. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, the author credits these endeavors with stirring his interests in the campaign all the more. This interest gave birth to his determination to broaden my horizon, to produce a one-volume comprehensive overview of the longest campaign of the war.

Considered the most decisive campaign of the war, the combined army and navy operations that focused on Vicksburg have, until recently, been largely ignored by writers and historians due to its length and complexity. Yet Ballard argues forcefully that the campaign's significance demands that its many nuances be grasped to fully understand the course of the war in the Western Theater and its impact on the outcome of the great struggle for national identity. Thankfully, over the past 20 years, a growing number of scholarly works on the Vicksburg

campaign have been released that appeal to readers across the spectrum of interest. (For those who want the nuts and bolts of the campaign in minute detail there is the trilogy by Edwin C. Bearss, *The Vicksburg Campaign* (Morningside, 1985-1986). For those who seek analysis, Warren Grabau's *Ninety-eight Days: A Geographer's View of the Vicksburg Campaign* (University of Tennessee Press, 2000), fits the bill. And for those who seek the color commentary there is *Vicksburg Is the Key: The Struggle for the Mississippi River* (University of Nebraska Press, 2003) by William Shea, whose clarity as a writer is unexcelled.

Ballard is the first writer to combine detail, analysis, and color commentary into a single volume on the campaign. In doing so, the talented archivist at Mississippi State University blends the paradigms of traditional military history, which focus on strategy and tactics presented through the views of commanders, with the new approach that centers more on the impact of war on soldiers, civilians, politics, and other nonmilitary areas of the human experience. This approach is comprehensive and the author skillfully navigates his course, presenting an accurate view of the realities and ramifications of war.

By bridging the gap between general works and detailed histories, Ballard's **Vicksburg: The Campaign That Opened the Mississippi** fills a large void in the available literature on this campaign. His work will stand as a foundation on which intrepid students can launch their adventure into the odyssey that is Vicksburg.

Terrence J. Winschel serves as historian at Vicksburg National Military Park and is the author of Triumph & Defeat: The Vicksburg Campaign; Vicksburg: Fall of the Confederate Gibraltar; and co-author of Vicksburg Is the Key: The Struggle for the Mississippi River.