

Shiloh 1862

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Review

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Groom, Winston *Shiloh 1862*. National Geographic, \$30.00 ISBN 978-1-4262-0874-4

Rewriting the Shiloh Narrative

For those coming to the subject of the Shiloh Campaign for the first time, readers will find in *Shiloh 1862* an accessible, highly skilled, readable introduction to this perennially fascinating operation. Winston Groom has obviously found the high drama, colour, intrinsic excitement and appalling suffering of the Civil War ideal material for his books, as he is recently the author of *Vicksburg 1863* (2009) as well. His book is fashioned in a highly professional manner: the chapters are cleverly arranged and neither too long nor too short. He also shapes his material so that the doings of the great personalities do not crowd out the experience of the men in the ranks. Groom is also alert to the links between seemingly minor events and the mishaps that take their place in the mighty chain of great events. For instance, he writes about a patrol led by Major James E. Powell of the 25th Missouri Infantry, who in the dark stumbled on William J. Hardee's Corps of 10,000 men. He writes "this savage little fight at last touched off what was to be thus far the bloodiest battle in American military history. It would be remembered as the most brutal battle in the West during the entire Civil War" (69). Groom manages to capture the atmosphere of such encounters and adds telling detail. He has an eye for an apt turn of phrase that captures the topography in the mind's eye. Pittsburg Landing he sums up as "a nondescript hog-and-cotton loading station perched before tall oak-strewn bluffs where steamboats put in from time to time" (40).

On the controversial issues that surround the campaign, Mr. Groom offers little new insight, but instead a judicious summary of the consensus of recent scholarship. He agrees that the success attained by the initial Confederate onslaught cannot be explained away: "great blame attaches" to Grant "and to a lesser extent Sherman" for creating a state of mind determined to continue the

Union advance come what may rather than defend what had already been taken (62). As Ulysses S. Grant and William T. Sherman played such a large part in the eventual defeat of the Confederacy, they have been the subject of both fierce denunciation and an equally stout defence. Groom is probably right that Sherman's gruff manner before the battle resulted from his "overcompensating" for accusations made four months previously that he was "insane" and a "nervous Nellie" (59). Grant's boss, Major General Henry W. Halleck, who nursed doubts about his subordinate's abilities, had issued an order that he should entrench which Grant found reasons to ignore. Grant had also been ordered to wait for the arrival of Don Carlos Buell's Army of the Ohio, marching to Pittsburg Landing from Nashville. This last order Grant obeyed to the letter, but he assumed, Groom avers, "that the enemy might be so obliging" as to do what he expected, that is, remain on the defensive, "and this seemed to create a kind of blindness even as the evidence of danger mounted" (63). Groom's harsh verdict should not mislead readers to expect undue Confederate sympathy, far from it. As the Lost Cause tradition requires an image of Grant lolling in a permanent state of drunken stupor, Groom with a sharp rebuke dismisses the silly *canard* that Grant was intoxicated as the battle opened. 6 April, he affirms, "was shaping up to be the most trying [day] ever of Grant's long and illustrious military career, and one thing for certain is that a drunkard could never have made his way through it" (74).

The sheer gruesome unpleasantness of the fighting and the shock felt by all participants is well conveyed in Groom's account of the fighting for the Hornet's Nest. The Confederate commander, Albert Sidney Johnston, committed ten brigades to take this ground of dubious tactical value. It also cost him his life, because the 45th Tennessee Infantry had refused to advance and Johnston had offered to lead them himself. A bullet hit an artery, he ignored the wound, and he expired by 2:45 pm. His deputy, P.G.T. Beauregard, took over but failed to grip the battle and later in the evening called off the Confederate attack, setting the stage for Grant's counter-stroke the following day.

If Groom's book has a weakness, it is too long in relation to the material used. There is too much background, on the war's coming, on earlier operations, and the potted biographies of leading figures are too detailed. Although there are switches in time back and forth, Groom's account of the battle only begins in earnest after 200 pages have been turned. Still, for those who luxuriate in the detail, they will find much to enjoy here.

Brian Holden Reid is Professor of American History and Military Institutions and Academic Member of Council, King's College London, England, and the author of America's Civil War: The Operational Battlefield, 1861-1863 (2008).