

George Henry Thomas: As True as Steel.

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Review

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Wills, Brian Steel *George Henry Thomas: As True as Steel.* University Press of Kansas, \$39.95 ISBN 978-0-7006-1841-5

A Fresh Analysis of the Rock of Chickamauga

When the state of his birth seceded, Virginian Robert E. Lee elected to fight for the South; when his home state seceded, Virginian Georgia Henry Thomas chose to go with the North. In defeat Lee became arguably the most famous of Civil War generals; in victory George Thomas faded from popular memory even though one twentieth-century author called Thomas the “third of the triumvirate who won the war for the Union” (1). The two men had been professional soldiers and friends before the war sent them down different paths, both gaining fame in different ways. They both died in 1870, neither man leaving a written record of his participation in the conflict.

Author Brian Steel Wills, who wrote an impressive biography of Confederate cavalryman Nathan Bedford Forrest, has taken on another subject who left little behind for researchers and seldom discussed his personal feelings or motivations in the extant correspondence. Why George Thomas decided to fight against family and friends remains unclear, although his adopted home became Troy, New York, after he married Frances Kellogg in 1852. When Thomas died at the age of fifty-three in California, his body was returned to New York where he was laid to rest in the Kellogg family vault in Troy; his widow spent the next nineteen years defending her husband’s reputation and vowing that she was not the reason he had remained loyal to the Union.

George Thomas was born in Southampton County, Virginia, in the summer of 1816, the middle child of six sisters and two brothers. By the time he left for West Point in 1836, the family fell into the moderately wealthy planter class in southern Virginia. On arrival at the military academy, one of Thomas’s first roommates was William T. Sherman, and the young Virginian graduated twelfth

in his class, six behind Sherman. The U.S. Army became his life; Thomas would live and die a United States soldier. Between the time he left West Point and his decision not to resign in 1861, he served in various commands, including fighting in the Mexican War. Thomas was in Texas with the Second U.S. Cavalry when trouble started in 1861.

Although Thomas elected to remain a U.S. soldier, he would always be a Virginian in the eyes of many people in the North. Even Abraham Lincoln would have to be convinced of his value. In the South he alienated himself from friends and family, becoming as Edmund Kirby Smith said, "a Virginia renegade" (107).

Thomas never fought in Virginia though, his assignments kept him in the Western Theater from the time he was made a brigadier general of volunteers 1861 until he left for the Division of the Pacific in 1869. He is best known for his stand against Braxton Bragg in September 1863, earning the sobriquet "Rock of Chickamauga" and for his victory in the battle of Nashville in December 1864. Author Wills believes that the decision to stay loyal to his oath to the Army was something he could not alter: "That was the essence of the man—the core of the rock—and remaining with the Union was the course he had set" (103).

Thomas was a meticulous professional soldier, whose reputation for deliberation gave way to whispers of being slow when ordered to act. Frances Thomas claimed that the sometimes difficult relationship between Thomas and Ulysses S. Grant stemmed from her husband being placed in command of a column in Grant's place following the battle of Shiloh. Grant, she claimed, "never forgave him" (151). When Thomas turned down the chance to replace Don Carlos Buell in command of the army in late 1862, Lincoln's frustration gave vent to the response, "[I]et the Virginian wait" and "we will try [William] Rosecrans" (161).

But his time would come. "Old Slow Trot," as he was called, became the hero of the day on September 20, 1863, when he held his position during the battle of Chickamauga. Thomas was not enthusiastic when asked to replace Rosecrans, but he always put duty above personal feelings. After the arrival of Grant and Sherman at Chattanooga in the autumn of 1863, and the successful drive to push the Confederates away from the city, Thomas headed the Army of the Cumberland when Sherman moved toward Atlanta in the spring of 1864. Sherman never felt that Thomas's army was the equal of the Army of the Tennessee (his old command), but part of that indictment was laid at the door of

Thomas's hesitancy to act on the spur of the moment. Still, Sherman could write Henry Halleck in September 1864: "George Thomas, you know, is slow, but as true as steel" (5).

In spite of concerns about his lack of aggression, Thomas was sent to Nashville to deal with the Confederate army under John Bell Hood in the autumn of 1864. But he did not act fast enough to suit his superiors and Grant intended to replace him. "In short," says Brian Wills, "to some in the higher echelons of Union command, Thomas seemed to be incapable of understanding the broader strategic role he was supposed to play, much less implementing it" (340). This statement came in response to Thomas's failure to follow up his victory at Nashville by destroying Hood's crippled army. Frances Thomas later claimed the problem stemmed from John Schofield, whom she said was trying to steal the command away from her husband. Grant was not willing to hear excuses about why the Virginian did not move quickly to destroy Hood post-Nashville, so he broke up his command and left Thomas to wait. The battle of Nashville effectively ended Thomas's direct participation in the fighting. Although there were problems to deal with in Tennessee in 1865, Thomas moved into the post-war period without much changing. He would remain in military command during Reconstruction until he left for California in 1869.

According to Frances Thomas, it was the situation during the Nashville campaign that caused her husband's untimely death. Over the years much discussion had taken place regarding the decision to replace Thomas at Nashville, a move that did not occur. But in March 1870 an anonymous letter appeared in a New York newspaper entitled "Secrets of History■the Battle of Nashville■Was Grant's Order a Blunder?" regarding Grant's belief that Schofield would have been the better man to lead the army. According to his wife, the personal assault on his character was such that when finally writing a response, Thomas collapsed and died.

As Wills points out, Thomas's death meant that others would write about his "legacy in a manner to fit their own agendas" (449). He was not there to defend himself when the plethora of memoirs appeared as former officers attempted to justify their decisions and enhance their own reputations. Perhaps Albert Castel said it best when he wrote about Thomas: "A Southerner, he contributed more to the Union victory than any Northern-born general except Grant" (463). As such he deserves this new biography. Well written and informative, Wills has done an excellent job of fleshing out a man who, when alive, was extremely private.

Wills believes that from Thomas's early days at West Point his course in life was set. His duty to his country superseded any duty he felt to his native state. He had, says Wills, "the pulse of a patriot and a nature whose devotion to duty and his ideals made him 'as true as steel'" 471). For a better understanding of one of the men who won the Civil War, this book comes highly recommended.

Dr. Bailey is the author or editor of eight books on the Civil War, including, The Chessboard of War: Sherman and Hood in the Autumn Campaigns of 1864. She also edits the newsletter of the Society of Civil War Historians.