

### War Upon the Land: Military Strategy and the Transformation of Southern Landscapes During the American Civil War

Sara M. Gregg

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## Review

Gregg, Sara M.

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**Brady, Lisa M.** *War Upon the Land: Military Strategy and the Transformation of Southern Landscapes during the American Civil War*. University of Georgia Press, \$69.95 ISBN 978-0-08203-4249-8

### New Methods for Civil War Study

Historians of the Civil War have long recognized the impact of the land and resources on the course of the war, just as environmental historians have generally acknowledged the importance of military conflicts in shaping human interactions with nature. Few books have been published, however, that merge the fields of military history and environmental history as gracefully as Lisa M. Brady's *War Upon the Land*. Until very recently there have been too few collaborations among scholars in these fields, and Brady, who emerged early in her career as a liaison between the two, demonstrates the fruitfulness of cross-fertilization.

Brady's book addresses three aspects of the Civil War that permit a deepening of our understanding between military strategy and the natural environment: the physical features that allowed for the ready defense of southern strongholds, notably Vicksburg; the importance of a rich agricultural landscape to the viability of the Confederate war effort; and the impact of the *chevauchée* upon the Union's 1864 efforts to create a "wilderness" out of a domesticated landscape, and thereby subdue the South. For both environmental historians and students of the Civil War, *War Upon the Land's* narrative will be tremendously informative, as it merges recent interpretations from both fields into an engaging analysis.

Environmental historians have long stressed the importance of recognizing the agency of nature—that is, the idea that natural forces operate in conjunction with human decisions to affect the course of history. Brady applies this idea to her study of Union military strategy, explaining how wartime events highlighted

the importance of ideas about nature as well as the natural world itself.

The first two chapters of *War Upon the Land* examine how the Union leadership sought to manage the Mississippi River's flow and thus break the Confederate forces' stranglehold on the river at Vicksburg. Army engineers initially designed canals and attempted to divert the river, ultimately demonstrating not only the inability of engineers to manage the mighty Mississippi (a challenge then as well as now). The army's failed attempt to assert engineering mastery over the natural world forced General Ulysses S. Grant to improvise a new strategy to take Vicksburg, an adaptation of the age-old *chevauchée*, which drastically shifted the fortunes of the confident defenders of the "Key to the South." The second chapter on Vicksburg contextualizes Grant's plan to cut his forces from their supply lines, and to sustain his troops by employing the produce of the Mississippi countryside. Foraging liberated the Union Army from a reliance on vulnerable supply depots at the same time that it took the war even more directly to the residents of the South. In the process, the newfound vulnerability of Confederate resources was driven acutely home during the successful siege of the veritable fortress at Vicksburg.

The *chevauchée* achieved its goal of breaking the Confederacy's last defense on the Mississippi, which encouraged Union generals to adapt the strategy to the campaigns of 1864 and 1865. Two chapters survey the implementation of this tactic, illustrating how it depleted the resources materially and destroyed the morale of the secessionists. Brady deploys the impressions of both soldiers and the civilians who witnessed the depredations of the Union Army to convey the scale of the destruction, as well as its cultural and military consequences. Brady focuses here on the Confederacy's agricultural resources, demonstrating how Union assaults on stores of food, fodder, livestock, and even seed and agricultural implements helped to devastate the economic underpinnings of the South. In this sense, Brady argues, the productive landscape of the South was both its greatest strength and its fatal weakness. The strategy worked, and Sheridan's campaign in the Shenandoah Valley, as well as Sherman's March through Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina, helped to drive large swaths of the South to a point of near starvation, and to pull southern men home and away from the battlefields. Generals Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan were all clear in their purpose: to destroy the Confederacy's ability to supply its military forces, and, more generally, to devastate the rebellion's economic underpinnings. The "wilderness" that resulted from the scorched-earth policy subsequently transformed the regional landscape and undermined the South's survival.

Brady's analysis of the language used to describe the destruction will especially interest social and environmental historians, although her brief examination of the larger consequences of the nation's evolving relationship with nature feels hurried and incomplete. Wilderness and nature protection are themes that tie this book to the dominant narratives in environmental history, but ones that do not necessarily prove to have vast explanatory force. Brady also speaks directly to environmental historians as she addresses the critical importance of agriculture to the viability of the southern war effort. The author acknowledges the complexity of agroecology, describing it ably in the introduction as "the process by which humans endeavor to draw sustenance or profit from nature through agriculture and animal husbandry," which in turn creates a new ecological system (10). Unfortunately, this thoughtful framing of these ideas does not translate into an effective tool in the rest of the book. Framing the *chevauchée* as an assault on the South's "agroecological foundations"—which it certainly is—Brady uses the term too superficially. Nowhere in the text does Brady actually examine agro-ecology beyond a cursory reference to agricultural products and their critical importance to the South. This is a relatively small complaint about an otherwise engaging and important book, but one that demonstrates the danger of relying too much on keywords that distract from the larger significance of the work at hand.

*War Upon the Land* will be a valuable resource for people interested in the history of the southern landscape, for those concerned with the evolution of military strategy during the Civil War years, and for scholars engaged with the language of nature preservation. It raises many new questions about the larger influence of the war on the land, which is the hallmark of a truly innovative work of scholarship. Students of the Civil War will be well advised to add this gem of a book to their libraries, and to consider always the role of nature in shaping the course of the conflict.

*Sara M. Gregg is an assistant professor of history at the University of Kansas and she is the author of Managing the Mountains: Land Use Planning, the New Deal, and the Creation of a Federal Landscape in Appalachia (Yale 2010) and a co-editor of American Georgics: Writings on Farming, Culture, and the Land (Yale 2011).*