Guerrilla Hunters in Civil War Missouri

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Recommended Citation

Mann, Ralph (2013) "Guerrilla Hunters in Civil War Missouri," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.15.3.11

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol15/iss3/10>

Review

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Summer 2013

Erwin, James *Guerrilla Hunters in Civil War Missouri*. History Press, \$19.99
ISBN 978-1-60949-745-3

What it Took to Win in Civil War Missouri

In this concise, well-illustrated narrative, the author, attorney James W. Erwin, undertakes to tell the story of the Unionist militias that were the ultimate victors in Missouri's murderous guerrilla war. The militias produced no talented leaders like William Quantrill, no romantic figures like Jesse James, and certainly no sociopaths like Bill Anderson, and are commonly portrayed as the victims of Rebel exploits and atrocities, but they thwarted Confederate recruitment, protected vital lines of Union communication, and finally, doggedly, hunted down, killed, or drove out their more celebrated enemies. The author's account starts with a brief background for Missouri's war—Bleeding Kansas, Dred Scott, and the internal struggle over secession. The creation of the Missouri State Militia by Governor Hamilton Gamble reflected that history. The author pays careful attention to the political provenance of the militia, rooted in the conservative Unionist state majority, neither secessionist nor abolitionist, that Gamble represented and that emerged from earlier conflicts. He also gives a generous interpretation of the Missouri Confederate and guerrilla point of view. To clarify the ensuing warfare, Erwin maps out the state into four geographical districts, explains the circumstances that shaped each district's war experience—transportation lines, terrain, proximity to Kansas, Arkansas, or St. Louis—and then recounts the skirmishes, ambushes, massacres, seemingly every armed conflict within the state. Some of the fights are well known, especially the ones like Centralia, figuring guerrilla cunning and atrocity. Others, the smaller Union victories, sometimes just as black flag, are less well known, although their cumulative effect was to gradually reassert control over Missouri. Other, later, militia organizations are also described, along with their political and military roles. Erwin ably places his fights within their larger contexts, perhaps most importantly Sterling Price's invasion and Henry Halleck's and Thomas Ewing's

bitterly punitive measures against guerrillas and the civilians who harbored them. He effectively uses the personal records of two of his guerrilla hunters, Bazel Lazear and George Wolz, an officer and a private, to illustrate the political personal experiences of representative Union soldiers. He knows the pertinent literature on Missouri politics and guerrilla warfare. And finally, he achieves his purpose, to bring to notice these decidedly unromantic Unionists and their successful endeavors.

This book is more descriptive than analytical. It sometimes raises questions that it does not undertake to answer. For example, German American Unionists seem to have been particularly hated and particularly brutally treated by Confederate guerrillas, especially Dave Poole, but there is no real explanation why. The presence of Radical Republican bushwhackers and the growing Radical political power in the state are noted, but not linked to the guerrilla struggle. More basically, the book does not deal with how the fighting related to slaveholding and its demise, even though the Missouri State Militia had an overt political stance—and purpose. Erwin knows the literature on Missouri's inner war, but does not use his research's contributions to challenge its interpretations. He chooses not to make comparisons with other border states with internal conflicts. None of this was central to the author's intention. He set out to tell an untold tale, and did so; but this focus, while enlightening for the general reader, limits the usefulness of his story for professional students of the Civil War.

Ralph Mann has recently retired from the University of Colorado, but continues to work on violence and subsistence in Civil War era Appalachian Virginia.