

Rebels in the Rockies: Confederate Irregulars in the Western Territories

Matt McDonough

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

McDonough, Matt (2015) "Rebels in the Rockies: Confederate Irregulars in the Western Territories," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 17 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.17.1.06

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol17/iss1/5>

Review

McDonough, Matt

Winter 2015

Pittman, Walter *Rebels in the Rockies: Confederate Irregulars in the Western Territories*. McFarland Publishing, \$39.95 ISBN 9780786478200

Confederate Irregulars on the Margins of the Civil War

Walter Pittman's new book, *Rebels in the Rockies*, examines the lives and battlefield exploits of "rebel frontiersmen" who fought the Civil War in the far West (much of the story takes place in Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado). He argues that these Confederate irregulars operated with little to no oversight from Richmond and fought as both frontline combat troops as well as shadowy brigands behind Union lines. Prior to this work there had been scant attention paid to these soldiers and their actions so Pittman's work does fill a void. The chaotic nature and haphazard record keeping in the West left few credible accounts available and the relatively small amount of troops fighting in the area (by Civil War standards at least) means this theater of war was often considered a sideshow at best. Pittman readily acknowledges such issues stating "there is no intention on the part of the author to claim that the events described here significantly influenced the outcome of the larger war."(p.1) Consequently, the book focuses almost exclusively on the local players and refrains from making many connections to the larger conflict.

Fortunately, Pittman is an excellent writer and he utilizes the available evidence to the utmost. While few official Confederate documents still exist for these troops and their operations, the author has done much digging and recovered newspaper accounts, Union dispatches as well as pertinent diaries and memoirs. The 260pg and meticulously footnoted book is filled with appropriate pictures and relevant maps. Pittman describes these western irregulars as a motley assortment of men from all walks of life. While many were miners, prospectors and ranch hands others were wealthy and prominent local leaders. Many of these men had served as filibusters in the 1850s and were members of the secret southern society the Knights of the Golden Circle (p. 48-49). Pittman

argues that although these men joined several different units such as the Arizona Guards, the Brigands, and the Reynolds Gang, they were unified by their loyalty to the Southern cause and a thirst for adventure. The author defines these troops as "elites" who specialized in "military mayhem" and through their actions tied down Union forces many times their number.

Pittman is at his best when he vividly describes these soldier's dispositions and their various exploits. He claimed that the men of the "Brigands" fought hard and partied harder as they all enjoyed "gambling, drinking, horse racing and the usual related activities involving females." (p.47) One of the more colorful and unsavory characters was Colonel John Baylor. This Confederate officer was very capable on the battlefield and devised an ingenious ploy where he planted a mailbag that falsely implicated prominent New Mexican officials as Southern spies. (p.28) Baylor was also a violent killer who sanctioned the torture of people suspected of harboring Union sentiments as well as murdering a newspaper editor who published an unfavorable account of his actions. (p.32-34)

Readers will be particularly fascinated by the Reynold's Gang, an irregular group led by two miner brothers from Colorado. This band of adventurers sowed discord wherever they rode. After being captured by Federal authorities the band rushed the jailer and escaped and primarily served defending Native American settlements that were loyal to the Confederacy. In one very clever ruse the Gang attacked a civilian mule train but before departing with the goods the brothers insinuated that they were from El Paso which launched a manhunt for them in the wrong direction. Pittman argued that during their brief tenure of service this band of irregulars fought against "federals, jayhawkers, Union-aligned Indian tribes and the wild plains Indians." Most of the Reynold's Gang finally met its end when they were ordered to be moved under guard to Ft. Lyon after being captured by Union authorities. On route the members were all executed in cold blood. Pittman argues that the exploits of these men and their subsequent murder has gone unnoticed for so long because it coincided with and was ultimately overshadowed by the horrifying Sand Creek Massacre. (p.178-184)

Ultimately, those readers in search of the next groundbreaking revelation on the Civil War will be disappointed. But for those interested in a well-written story about colorful characters and daring exploits, *Rebels in the Rockies* should not be missed.

Matthew D. McDonough, Lecturer of History at Coastal Carolina University