

### Richard Taylor and the Red River Campaign of 1864

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## Review

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**Mitcham, Samuel** *Richard Taylor and the Red River Campaign of 1864*. Pelican Press, \$26.95 ISBN 9781455616336

### Trials and Tribulations Along the Red River

In recent years, historians have paid increased attention to the Red River Campaign of 1864. Books by Gary Joiner and Jeffery Prushankin, in particular, have provided thoughtful and well researched analyses of the failed Union attempt to seize Shreveport, Louisiana, the Headquarters of the Confederate Department of the Trans-Mississippi. From these works, and others, a fairly consistent portrayal of the campaign and its main actors has emerged. Strategically, Union planning was muddled and influenced by partisan politics and a willingness to appease speculators in Confederate cotton. The ultimate consequence was the diversion of valuable men and resources to a campaign very much in the backwater of the war. Operationally and tactically, bad generalship plagued the Union effort with Major General Nathaniel Banks making a series of bad decisions that placed his numerically superior army, and Admiral David Porter's supporting inland U.S. Navy, in a succession of compromising positions. All it took for the Confederacy to defeat this force was a bold, imaginative, and relentless commander, who did not fear the odds against him. Major General Richard Taylor was that commander, and he very nearly annihilated Banks's army while also coming close to sinking or capturing Porter's fleet.

There were other parts to this story. Union troops destroyed large quantities of civilian property and food as they first invaded and then retreated along the Red River. More important to the final outcome of the campaign was the strategic decision making of Lieutenant General Edmund Kirby Smith, who commanded the Confederate Department of the Trans-Mississippi. Union operations in Arkansas readily distracted Smith, and he thus deprived Taylor of badly needed troops that could have been used to cut off and destroy Banks. It

was a decision that incensed Taylor and led to an irreparable rift between the two Confederate commanders. Although Smith achieved some measure of success in Arkansas, those battles produced no fundamental change in the strategic situation.

Because many historians have now told the story of the Red River campaign, it is the task of the writer to find some compelling reason to re-visit the action. Unfortunately, Samuel Mitcham, a geographer and author of numerous popular military histories, does not do this in his *Richard Taylor and the Red River Campaign of 1864*. The book is, instead, a highly derivative narrative of events plagued by a far too many errors in research and writing.

Many of Mitcham's problems could have been mitigated by a strong editor. Mitcham rambles far too frequently with mini biographies of the important—and not so important—characters. In one chapter alone he wanders for three pages describing the antebellum life of Confederate General Alfred Mouton and then for over five pages with the biography of Prince Camille de Polignac. The digressions sometimes veer to first-person asides that amount to nothing more than regional cheerleading such as when Mitcham trumpets Southern women as “the best cooks in the world, in my humble, but accurate opinion.”(96) A strong editorial hand would not only have restrained this sort of prose, it would have also caught the litany of misspellings, typographical errors, dangling modifiers, and colloquialisms that litter the manuscript. That same editorial hand might well have caught numerous factual errors that include calling tuberculosis a cancer and a map with misplaced cities and battles.

No less problematical are errors in research and interpretation. Mitcham reveals no archival research in a bibliography dominated by printed primary and secondary sources. Although Mitcham displays a familiarity with the most important and relevant works on the campaign, he is nevertheless loose in his documentation of a number of controversial assertions. This is particularly the case in his handling of the issue of Black Confederates. Although there continues to be room for further research concerning the proliferation of Black Confederates, this book does nothing to advance that endeavor. Mitcham fails to document his claim that Taylor's army was filled with black combatants. In a similar fashion, Mitcham provides no significant documentation for his assertion that large numbers of Confederate parolees from the surrender at Vicksburg flooded Taylor's ranks. While Mitcham can cite no specific number, he ultimately concludes—dubiously—that their presence was “significant, because

these men were highly motivated. They had scores to settle with the boys in blue, and they were about to settle them with a vengeance."(152)

This book is not without some virtue. Mitcham is a more than capable narrative historian. The numerous battles and skirmishes come alive with colorful detail and clear descriptions of complicated movements. However, this quality is completely overwhelmed by a massive number of stylistic and factual errors and a failure to perform documented original research. Interested readers (scholarly and buff) should stick to books on the Red River campaign written by Ludwell Johnson and Gary Joiner.

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