The Knoxville Campaign: Burnside and Longstreet in East Tennessee

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Review

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Hess, Earl *The Knoxville Campaign: Burnside and Longstreet in East Tennessee*. University of Tennessee Press, \$39.95 ISBN 978-1-57233-916-3

A Solid Look at an Important Campaign

Earl Hess adds to his already impressive body of work on the American Civil War with this new campaign study of the Knoxville campaign in the winter of 1863. While Hess does not offer any new path-breaking interpretations on his subject, he does produce what is now the standard scholarly study of this set of military operations. Hess illustrates the maturity of the modern campaign study, which integrates traditional “battles and leaders” history at the command level with coverage of the common soldier’s experience, in addition to the civilians caught in the path of war. Most importantly, Hess also provides some of the special expertise he holds as the foremost scholarly authority on Civil War field fortifications, which figure prominently in this campaign due to James Longstreet’s ill-fated assault on Fort Sanders on November 29, 1863. Finally, Hess includes a useful appendix on the campaign’s long-term legacy, both in terms of material remains and cultural memory.

While Hess’ study breaks no new bold interpretive ground, it provides a more in depth treatment of the campaign than some of the more biographical studies that cover the campaign within a different framework—for example, Jeffry Wert’s *General James Longstreet: The Confederacy’s Most Controversial Soldier—a Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), William Marvel’s *Burnside* (Chapel Hill: York: Simon and Schuster, 1993) University of North Carolina Press, 1991), and Alexander Mendoza, *Confederate Struggle for Command: General James Longstreet and the First Corps in the West* (College Station: Texas A&M; Press, 2008). It highlights Longstreet’s mixed performance in East Tennessee when given the opportunity of an independent command, and the assault on Fort Sanders deals another blow to the still resilient popular interpretation of Longstreet as a far-sighted general who knew the folly of

attaching entrenched positions, immortalized so powerfully in Michael Shaara's *Killer Angels*. Hess' study also is another reminder to historian that their assessment of Ambrose Burnside's generalship should not simply focus on the catastrophe that was Fredericksburg, and in a defensive setting such as his campaign against Longstreet, Burnside could prove himself an able commander. Furthermore, we cannot comprehend Burnside's continued service as commander of the IX Corps during the following spring and summer without knowing that he had acquitted himself reasonably well in an area of operations of high interest to the Union political leadership in Washington, due to the presence of a large Unionist population in East Tennessee.

While well researched and now the standard campaign study on its topic, some scholars might have hoped Hess would push into some new historiographical ground with regards to both his treatment of post-war memory, and interactions between the two contending military forces and the local white and black civilian population. The substantial numbers of Unionists in East Tennessee certainly presents an interesting wrinkle to a large literature that focuses on the Union armies' interactions with Confederate guerrillas, but Hess (for reasonable reasons) chooses to focus more on the ebb and flow of the campaign itself. With regards to the question of Civil War memory, while Hess himself was an early pioneer in studies of Civil War soldiers' ideas and world-view, the various cultural meanings of such memorialization takes a back burner in his study to a straightforward account of the campaign's presence in various forms of cultural production after the war. At this point, however, the reviewer is veering dangerously close to the sin of asking an author to unreasonably expand the scope of his work, and this should not distract from the usefulness of this contribution to the many high-quality campaign studies that already exist on the Civil War.

Dr. Wayne Wei-siang Hsieh is an Assistant Professor of History at the U.S. Naval Academy. He is the author of West Pointers and the Civil War: The Old Army in War and Peace (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), and various academic articles.