

The Chickamauga Campaign: A Mad Irregular Battle: From the Crossing of the Tennessee River Through the Second Day, August 22-September 19, 1863

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Review

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Powell, David A. *The Chickamauga Campaign: A Mad Irregular Battle: From the Crossing of the Tennessee River Through the Second Day, August 22-September 19, 1863.* Savas Beatie, \$37.50 ISBN 9781611211740

A Promising Start to a Refreshing Trilogy on Chickamauga

A growing number of historians have lamented over the years that Gettysburg and the war in Virginia have long been the obsession of the printing industry, while the Western Theater has often been ignored. As the sesquicentennial cycle draws to its conclusion, one positive aspect has been the increased attention to the war beyond the field of operations of Lee's army. While publishing houses will continue to print what sells, Chickamauga, the only major Confederate victory in the west, has been one of the bright spots in the rise of Western Theater historical subjects. Several books in the past few years have highlighted the actions on the fields south of Chattanooga. David A. Powell's *The Chickamauga Campaign: A Mad Irregular Battle: From the Crossing of the Tennessee River Through the Second Day, August 22 – September 19, 1863* is not only the most recent of these works; it is perhaps the most detailed piece of literature published on the battle.

Significantly, this book is the first of a three volume set planned by Savas Beatie on the battle and its aftermath. *A Mad Irregular Battle* only covers from the beginning of the campaign for Chattanooga until the end of the first days' battle. The second volume will cover the final day of fighting and the retreat into Chattanooga; volume three is to cover the controversies that surround Chickamauga, as well as Powell's bibliography and more. When finally complete, the three volume set has the potential to be the single best research source for information on the battle. Only time and the third volume will tell if that plays out.

One important aspect that struck me almost instantly was that Rosecrans was not automatically shown to be an animated, if not manic, caricature, heavily

influenced by his priest. Drawing on recent scholarship also published by Savas Beatie on the relationship between Grant and Rosecrans, Powell gives us a Federal commander who is a steady soldier, but one who errs when faced with the lack of accurate intelligence. The General began to lose his nerve while deploying an army in the scattered gaps of the Lookout range, yet Powell evokes a man who does not know where his enemy is, and who must maneuver an army through a terrain that masks not only his movements, but those of his foe.

Another feature of Powell's research that gives a new angle on the battlefield is the presence of civilians. In previous works on Chickamauga, the reader comes to know the names of the open fields where major actions occurred, but they are never introduced to those agrarians who opened the fields and tried to scratch an existence from the clearings. Through direct text and impressively detailed footnotes (something I appreciated) Powell gives a brief statement about the non-combatants who lived and fled from the armies. I have visited the battlefield several times, and yet it was not until reading this work that I felt that I had a fair understanding of the families who called the area home. If there is one lacuna in the history of Chickamauga, it may well be the fact that there is no substantive volume on the people whose farms created the field of battle.

This is not the history of a battle written exclusively from the *ORs* and the grand sweeping scale of combat as viewed by staff officers and generals. Powell liberally uses a multitude of primary documents to augment his deep knowledge of the battle, representing an extensive research process. Thomas and Rosecrans, Bragg and others have their say in this work, but so do the enlisted men and company officers who did the fighting. Perhaps this is not as important to note as today as it was in the past, but it is still refreshing to see the confusion of the Viniard field fight and the struggles in the brushy undergrowth represented by those who fought there. Powell's evocative writing style not only gives voice to the soldier and diarist, but to the landscape itself. Nature is an actor of great import in the drama that played out between Bragg and Rosecrans, as previous authors have detailed; Powell writes in a manner that shows an intense knowledge of the landscape of the field, not simply in its current state, but as it appeared in the autumn of 1863. The confusion of command is well known, but Powell brings the reader into the dark and tangled forests where the fight devolved into company, squad and individual battles.

At times it seems like Powell overloads his audience with information. This is particularly true with the biographies, sometimes extensive biographies, of the general officers and regimental leaders involved in the fighting. It takes nearly four pages (pp. 422-426) to develop the antipathy between Jefferson C. Davis and the brigadiers under him. The two pages given to Brig. Gen. Brannan's pre-war family drama (pp. 296-297) gives an interesting backstory to the man, but does not significantly add to our understanding of the officer and how he fared in Brock field. It is wonderful to acknowledge that these were men and not statues that fought, but such digressions would not survive the editorial process for a one volume treatment of the battle. Perhaps the luxury of a three volume work is that it allows one the space to paint such pictures.

This is the third work on the battle of Chickamauga authored by Powell; by the time the third and final volume of this study reaches the press that number will swell to five, making the author perhaps the most knowledgeable voice on the history of the battle of Chickamauga. My only regret about reviewing the first volume of the series is that I will have to wait to purchase the final two volumes.

Dr. Robert Welch is an independent scholar living in western Illinois. His current research is based on the Civil War as experienced in one town through the two newspapers published there. He is also researching the act of foraging in the western theater.