

To Antietam Creek: The Maryland Campaign of September 1862

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Review

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Hartwig, D. Scott *To Antietam Creek: The Maryland Campaign of September 1862*. Johns Hopkins University Press, \$49.95 ISBN 978-1-4214-0631-2

A New Look at a Pivotal Campaign

Stephen Sears, Richard Slotkin, Joseph Harsh, and Civil War veteran Ezra Carman are just a few of the historians who have committed pen and paper to recount the 1862 Antietam campaign. Given the quality of their books and so many others, do Civil War enthusiasts really need another accounting of Lee's first invasion of the North? In the case of D. Scott Hartwig's *To Antietam Creek*, yes, room should be made on the bookshelf. While historians frequently overuse "definitive" and "comprehensive" as descriptors in book reviews, such terms are appropriate in this case. In 652 pages of text, plus more than one hundred pages of appendices and notes, Hartwig recounts the campaign from the conclusion of Second Bull Run to the eve of Antietam's bloodletting. To be clear, this weighty volume concludes on the night of September 16, 1862, with the opposing armies tensed for the morrow's fight. Readers anticipating the telling of the Civil War's bloodiest day must await volume two.

Although Hartwig offers no new revelations, he crafts this history in grand style, arguing that if the campaign and its culminating battle were not the turning point of the war, both sides recognized afterward that there would be "no turning back" (2). Equally in command of the primary and secondary sources, his narrative is meticulously detailed and stunningly vivid. The Battle of Fox's Gap, for example, consumes two chapters of nearly seventy-five pages, with each strike and counter-strike recounted with color and clarity. The fight at Turner's Gap is also played out over two chapters, Crampton's Gap over one. In another passage, the Confederates' occupation of Fredrick, Maryland, comes to life with all the sights, sounds, and smells of Robert E. Lee's ragged Rebels and their encounters with the town's wary, suspicious civilians. Clear, well-placed maps and a scattering of illustrations further complements the compelling narrative.

More than eloquent storytelling, *To Antietam Creek* also offers sound analysis of events and commanders. Hartwig holds both George McClellan and Lee to account for their errors, and equally credits their successes. McClellan's well-known leadership short-comings, insecurities, and paranoia are made inescapably evident with Hartwig's relentless but fair critiques. Close analysis of McClellan's tactical skills exposes his command deficiencies, exemplified by his plans on the eve of September 17, in which the general failed to consider some fundamental principles of war, including surprise, mass, and maneuver. Nevertheless, Hartwig offers praise when warranted, as in his acknowledgement of McClellan's success in resurrecting a disorganized, demoralized Army of the Potomac after the Second Bull Run debacle. In addition, the general's strategic thinking, after the discovery of Confederate Special Orders No. 191, which outlined the whereabouts and anticipated movements of Lee's scattered forces, was sound, characterized by initiative, mass, flexibility, simplicity, and the offensive. But as Omar Bradley once observed, a successful operation is ten percent planning and ninety percent execution. In the end, McClellan failed because he could not see clearly a path forward, and thus succumbed to circumstances rather than seizing the initiative to force his will upon events.

Seizing and maintaining momentum was second nature for Robert E. Lee, and while the challenges of the Maryland campaign were a trial for one of the war's best commanders, he again showed a mastery of shaping events. As the campaign was just getting under way, Lee discussed possible options with his two corps commanders, Stonewall Jackson and James Longstreet. Both recommended first confronting the pursuing Union forces, then making a strike at the Federal garrisons of Harpers Ferry and Martinsburg, Virginia. Lee, however, thought otherwise; take the outposts first, then with a secure line of communication, turn to face down McClellan. Lee's plan won over Jackson, but the idea of dividing the army into four parts was anathema to the more conservative Longstreet. Even after realizing that McClellan held a copy of Special Orders No. 191, Lee's audacity persisted beyond strategic sensibility as he labored to hold the initiative--if not Longstreet's full support. Lee's tactical prowess, however, remained exemplary, as Hartwig makes evident in his assessment of the general's careful management of troop dispositions on the eve of battle, his consideration of possible contingencies, and his determination to never relinquish the upper hand. That being said, Hartwig convincingly asserts that Lee's decision to make a stand at Sharpsburg "was building sand castles" (519).

To Antietam Creek is no book for the Civil War beginner. Any number of brief accounts serve that purpose. Hartwig's mastery of events and personalities, his vigorous writing, and the book's imposing length will be most appreciated by historians and those already familiar with the campaign's highlights. It is difficult to imagine that a future study on this campaign could supersede Hartwig's work, but until the completion of volume two on the battle itself, the story remains but half told.

Harry S. Laver, professor of history at Southeastern Louisiana University, is the author of: A General Who Will Fight: The Leadership of Ulysses S. Grant.