

### Portraits of Conflict: A Photographic History of Tennessee in the Civil War

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## Review

**Bergeron, Paul H.**

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**McCaslin, Richard B.** *Portraits of Conflict: A Photographic History of Tennessee in the Civil War*. University of Arkansas Press, \$59.95 hardcover ISBN 9781557288318

### Images of the War in Tennessee

The 20th anniversary of the publication of the first volume in the *Portraits of Conflict* series is appropriately marked by the appearance of this new book on Tennessee by Richard B. McCaslin. The author, a veteran of the series—having produced studies of South Carolina (1994) and North Carolina (1997)—and an established scholar of the Civil War once again brings his vast knowledge and admirable research skills to the challenge of preparing this volume.

The result is a truly impressive book that engages both the scholar and the general reader. Any historian experienced in searching for information on obscure persons will appreciate what McCaslin has accomplished. To be sure, not all of the over 250 persons represented in his photographs are veritable unknowns, but most are. The identification sketches that accompany each picture, whether a prominent or a relatively unknown individual, constitute an amazing treasure trove of data. And if that is not sufficient, the Appendix conveys additional information about most of the people.

As the reader moves from page to page, from photograph to photograph, he or she realizes that humanity of the 1860s is on parade in this book. One can glean insight and understanding by looking carefully at the images. That is the fundamental message or assumption of McCaslin's volume, as well as the others in this series. Examining the photographs of persons connected in some fashion to the Civil War either in Tennessee or in other places where Tennesseans served affords the reader an appreciation of the fairly wide range of ages of these individuals and also their differing levels of prominence. Moreover, one realizes again that this world was overwhelmingly male dominated, although McCaslin makes an admirable effort to offer pictures of a few females who were spouses,

nurses, or even spies. Judging by the photographs, the world of the Civil War military was almost exclusively white. Indeed, McCaslin includes an image of only one black—a Tennessee slave, Peter Thomas, who was freed as a result of Federal success at Island No. 10. My comment about the absence of photographs of blacks is not meant as a criticism or a reprimand; instead it is intended to acknowledge the paucity of such images. Scrutinizing the hundreds of photographs in this volume should prompt the reader to contemplate anew the extraordinary decade of the 1860s.

Chapter 1, Photography, probably presents more new information and observations than the introductory narratives that accompany the other chapters. Here the author provides a succinct survey of the various men who were engaged in the photography business in Tennessee. He points out and identifies the leading photographers who set up shop in the urban areas, as well as those who plied their trade in more remote places. Without question, the war was good for the photography business, as exhibited by the life and career of Robert M. Linn (and his family). Linn had the good fortune to establish his business at Lookout Mountain, a location that became exceptionable in late 1863 and thereafter—thanks to commanders such as Generals Braxton Bragg, William S. Rosecrans, and Ulysses S. Grant. The only image of a photographer in this chapter is the captivating one of Linn himself standing atop Umbrella Rock at Lookout Mountain. McCaslin also includes a familiar photograph of the railroad bridge at Strawberry Plains, near Knoxville, and speculates that the photographer seen in this picture is George Barnard, whom he discusses in the chapter. The author concludes this with brief observations about different types of photography prevalent in the 1860s.

McCaslin provides a frontispiece for each of the book's ten chapters, an inviting way to engage the reader. I would quibble, however, with at least two of his choices where he has exercised some artistic license. For example, Chapter 2, Secession, displays a very handsome photograph of Admiral David Farragut. But Farragut had nothing to do with the secession crisis in Tennessee nor did he actually have anything to do with Tennessee itself. A better choice, it seems to me, would be Isham G. Harris, who as governor almost single-handedly pushed Tennessee to secede; his quite suitable photograph is included on page 44. A similar situation occurs with Chapter 5, Chickamauga, whose frontispiece is an attractive image of General Ambrose Burnside, who had no direct connection with Chickamauga. Instead, a more appropriate photograph would be General George H. Thomas—the Rock of Chickamauga—whose distinguished image the

author provides on page 163.

All of the chapters have brief, highly readable, introductions that serve as the antechamber where information and analysis are presented before one enters the portrait gallery. Although McCaslin makes a few missteps, such as his discussions of Robert L. Caruthers as governor and Andrew Johnson as U.S. Senator, the introductory essays contribute greatly to the overall worth of the volume.

To conclude, the author, both in words and in pictures, offers his readers a remarkable view of Tennesseans in the Civil War. We are indebted to Professor McCaslin for such an outstanding accomplishment.

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