

Guardian of Savannah: Fort McAllister, Georgia, in the Civil War and Beyond

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Review

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Durham, Roger S. *Guardian of Savannah: Fort McAllister, Georgia, in the Civil War and Beyond*. University of South Carolina Press, \$39.95 hardcover ISBN 9781570037429

Fort McAllister's Role in the Civil War

Roger S. Durham has examined several aspects of the Civil War along the Georgia coast in his earlier works. In *A Confederate Yankee: The Journal of Edward William Drummond, a Confederate Soldier from Maine* (2004), he chronicled the experiences of Edward Drummond as a member of the garrison of Fort Pulaski and later as a prisoner of war. In *High Seas and Yankee Gunboats: A Blockade-Running Adventure from the Diary of James Dickson* (2005), Durham provides a detailed look at the experience of blockade running. He has also edited a collection of primary documents, *The Blues in Gray: The Civil War Journal of William Daniel Dixon and the Republican Blues Daybook* (2000), and this collection bears directly on Durham's latest study of the Civil War on the Georgia coast because for much of the war the Republican Blues served as part of the garrison of Fort McAllister on the Ogeechee River.

In *Guardian of Savannah: Fort McAllister, Georgia, in the Civil War and Beyond*, Durham sets out to provide the first comprehensive examination of Fort McAllister's history, and early on he identifies three areas where he will concentrate his attention: technological developments related to coastal defense, the importance of capturing Fort McAllister to the successful completion of William Sherman's March to the Sea, and "the physical survival of the fort to the present day" (xiv). He does not, however, neglect the other aspects of the fort's history.

Durham begins by examining the origins of Fort McAllister as a small humble battery on the Ogeechee River that was built as part of a much larger system of defenses for Savannah and the entire Georgia coast. This work was

eventually enlarged and expanded once Confederate authorities decided to abandon the state's lower coast and focus their efforts on defending the major port city of Savannah. After that decision was made, Fort McAllister became the southernmost of the city's defenses and was almost constantly upgraded and enlarged. Once he establishes the fort's role, Durham continues with a narrative approach that chronicles the daily life of the garrison as well as the engagements with Union forces, both military and naval.

It is in his discussion of these engagements that he deals with two of his major topics. The first of these is the subject of technological change. Many of the major developments related to coastal defense that came out of the Civil War are found in Fort McAllister's story, from this work's clear demonstration of the resistive power of properly-constructed earthworks, to the failure of ironclad warships mounting heavy ordnance to reduce those works, to the use of torpedoes in naval warfare, and even to the use of landmines. While Durham describes the use of all these technologies, he misses the opportunity to thoroughly assess many of them. For example, in late January 1863 and again in early March, Admiral Samuel F. Du Pont sent several Monitor-class vessels to attack Fort McAllister. Du Pont was then preparing a naval assault against Charleston harbor in South Carolina, and he wanted to test the capabilities of the new ironclads. In describing and assessing the engagements at Fort McAllister, Durham remarks repeatedly on the Union ironclads' slow rate of fire as a major limitation when attacking shore installations, but he makes no attempt to probe the reasons behind this shortcoming. While he quotes Du Pont's conclusions about the Monitors' capabilities at length, Durham himself does not attempt to explain the reasons behind this apparent design flaw.

Over a quarter of the text is devoted to the final leg of General Sherman's march across Georgia, which is not surprising since Fort McAllister was the final obstacle between Sherman's armies and his seaborne supplies. And as is the case with other aspects of the fort's history, Durham covers its final capture in painstaking detail, from the approach of Sherman's armies to the long-sought contact with the Union navy and the subsequent fall of Savannah. He concludes with a final chapter on the fort's post-war history and its eventual restoration by Henry Ford.

Despite the extraordinary level of detail throughout the work, it is marred in places by poor editing. One of the worst examples of this is what appears to be a single block quotation that begins on page 59 and runs on for nearly three full

pages. The introduction to this quote seems to indicate that it comes from a single source, but after several changes in perspective and a quick glance at the end notes, it becomes apparent that this quote has been pieced together from no less than five different sources. This is but one example of editorial choices that often confuse the reader, and there are other similar instances throughout the book.

Perhaps even more serious, there are occasional errors in the citations. When this reviewer encountered another block quote on page 149 that contained some confusing labels for the various speakers, he went to the original source for clarification and found that some of the material in this particular quote was not to be found in the original source cited. It appears that the previous citation may also have been intended to cover this quotation as well, and while it is doubtful that the obfuscation of sources was intentional, this kind of error will reduce the book's value to other researchers seeking to follow in Durham's footsteps.

Finally, the author's determination "to allow the participants themselves to speak directly to the reader" (xiii) becomes a problem when narrating military engagements along the Georgia coast. In these sections, the text becomes repetitive and confusing due to multiple and rapid changes in perspective from one primary source to another. Perhaps these descriptions would have benefited from a more authoritative editorial voice that could have blended the disparate sources together into a more coherent narrative.

Despite these flaws, however, Durham has succeeded in providing the most thorough examination of Fort McAllister's role in the Civil War to date. For anyone wishing to know more about the Civil War along Georgia's coasts, Durham's book provides much detail.

Mark A. Smith is an assistant professor of history at Fort Valley State University in central Georgia. He specializes in American history between 1815 and 1860, with a focus on the institutional development of the American military and military policy. He is currently working on a study of the Third System of Coastal Defense and the defense policy on which it was based, tentatively entitled Engineering Security: The Corps of Engineers and Third System Defense Policy, 1815-1861.