

General Sherman's Christmas: Savannah, 1864

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Review

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Weintraub, Stanley *General Sherman's Christmas: Savannah, 1864*.
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General Sherman's Georgia Campaign

Stanley Weintraub, author of *Silent Night* about World War I and *11 Days in December: Christmas at the Bulge, 1944* has made Christmas-at-war books into something of a sub-genre, the general theme of which is, war is bad. *Savannah for Christmas: A Civil War Saga* fits within that same context.

Based on a modest number of readily-available published accounts by such perennial favorites as Dolly Lunt Burge, Mary Chesnut, James Connolly, and of course General William T. Sherman, *General Sherman's Christmas* will acquaint those who have read anything about Sherman's campaign through Georgia with voices they know well by stringing together a series of familiar anecdotes and punctuating them with the reminder that war does not generally bring out the best in human beings. Most of the book takes place in Atlanta and central Georgia, arriving in Savannah in chapters seven and eight, and concluding with a glimpse of northern reaction to Sherman's campaign in chapter nine. The author plainly identifies Atlanta, not Savannah, as the event of real importance, and little in the book argues against that conclusion (216). Those who prefer their history books untouched by scholarship of the last four decades will appreciate this work. Some of its mistakes (the Battle of Gettysburg had not yet finished when Vicksburg fell on July 4, 1863? General Ulysses Grant's strategy was not to capture Lee's Army but rather to take Richmond?) and omissions (not a word about General Sherman's meeting with local black leaders in Savannah or the establishment of the Sherman Reserve appears in the book) are truly baffling.

What is most useful about the book is the opportunity it provides for reflection on the question of why it is that we want so badly to simplify and

mythologize everything about the Civil War, especially Sherman's campaign, even when evidence hits us over the head with more complexity. Weintraub clearly and persistently characterizes Sherman's campaign as wholly indiscriminate and utterly useless pillage, and certainly that is what those who lived in fear of the approach of Union troops dreaded. Yet aside from important contemporary scholarship such as Mark Grimsley's *Hard Hand of War*, which makes us see violence as calculated and targeted (which is not to say "nice," but which is quite different from wholly indiscriminate), one need only read the very anecdotes that Weintraub relates to notice that something much more complex, if no less terrifying, was taking place in Georgia in 1864. Again and again, Weintraub tells stories in which Union troops or Confederate civilians explain the sparing of homes and farms from destruction in terms of the political sentiments of the owners, and attribute the destruction that did happen to the owners' direct contributions to secession or to the Confederate war effort by serving as a government official or high-ranking officer. Another useful observation that can be extracted from the various episodes related in Weintraub's book is how internally divided both Union and Confederacy were. Even while trying to portray a gritty, united Confederate populace, Weintraub's anecdotes testify to a myriad of southern divisions beyond the obvious racial ones, including antipathy between state militias and the Confederate Army, Georgia governor Joseph Brown and Confederate President Jefferson Davis, early secessionists versus reluctant secessionists, and native-born Southerners versus immigrants. Similarly, the stories about the Union reveal animosities between Democrats and Republicans, civilians and soldiers, and infantry and cavalry. Such reminders, even if unintentional, are very healthy.

In sum, the general argument that war is bad and should be avoided is certainly unexceptionable, but those wishing to learn about Sherman's campaign in Georgia will be much better served by earlier works such as Joseph Glatthaar's *The March to the Sea and Beyond*.

Chandra Manning teaches 19th century U.S. History at Georgetown University and is the author of What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War. She is working on a book about contrabands and former slaves during and after the Civil War.