

Fields of Blood: The Prairie Grove Campaign

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Review

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Revitalizing the Importance of the Prairie Grove Campaign

If further proof were needed of William L. Shea's mastery of the Civil War campaign history, this is it. A professor of history at the University of Arkansas at Monticello, Shea has previously coauthored splendid studies of the Pea Ridge and Vicksburg campaigns. Flying solo this time, he has attained even loftier heights with a thoughtful and meticulous account of Prairie Grove. He has not only examined every facet of that unfairly neglected 1862 campaign, but he has also shown why serious students of the war can ill-afford to ignore either the political or military story of the Trans-Mississippi Theater.

Fought in northwest Arkansas on December 7, the battle of Prairie Grove is not the most famous military engagement in American history waged on that date. Even in the context of the Civil War, its strategic significance probably ranks behind the battle of Pea Ridge, fought nine months earlier and a few dozen miles to the north. Yet, the Prairie Grove campaign proved to be the last serious Confederate military offensive west of the Mississippi River, and it ended any practical rebel hope of reclaiming Missouri through the back door of northwest Arkansas. In retrospect, as Shea contends, it may even be said to have sealed the fate of the Trans-Mississippi.

One of Shea's hallmarks as a military historian is the close attention he pays to geography, landscape, and terrain. These elements, as much as numbers of men, leadership, and logistics, often shape decisions and impose conditions that dictate the course of a campaign or battle. Shea does well, then, to describe in some detail the rugged nature of the Ozark Mountains, where the Prairie Grove campaign unfolded. He explains how thick forests interspersed with broad prairies gave the landscape an unpredictable quality and limited visibility, and

how these factors, in turn, affected both the strategic and tactical plans of the military commanders. Equally, with the battle done, Shea pays tribute to the landscape, with its splintered trees and shredded vegetation, as a casualty of the fighting.

As for the men who did the splintering and shredding, Shea introduces readers to both high and low, leaders and followers, and there were some remarkable specimens of each at Prairie Grove. Perhaps none was more important than General Thomas C. Hindman, who commanded the Confederate Army of the Trans-Mississippi. Indeed, as Shea rightly says, the story of the Prairie Grove campaign is largely Hindman's story. Responsible for restoring order and raising an army in northern Arkansas after rebel defeat at Pea Ridge, Hindman succeeded to such an extent that he posed a serious threat to Union-occupied Missouri. The Federal response to this threat, with the newly-formed Army of the Frontier swooping down out of southwest Missouri, produced the Prairie Grove campaign.

On the Federal side, two names stand out: Generals. James G. Blunt and Francis J. Herron. Blunt commanded the Army of the Frontier. Known less for his military prowess than for his shady handling of the Union commissary and numerous backdoor political dealings with James H. Lane, Blunt was, nonetheless, personally brave and boisterously self-confident. Outnumbered by approximately 3,500 men, he would beat Hindman. Not so, however, without Herron. This twenty-five-year-old Pennsylvanian, having previously proved his mettle at Pea Ridge (he later received the Medal of Honor for his exploits there) was the real Union hero. In a little over three days, Herron led two divisions on a forced march of 120 miles to the battlefield from near Springfield, Missouri. Without this "epic of human endurance" (p.128), as Shea rightly calls the feat, Hindman surely would have defeated Blunt.

Very nearly half the book is given over to the battle, as Shea provides an hour by hour account of the action. The fighting was intense. Remember those splintered trees. Nearly all participants would recall the artillery duel between Union and Confederate gunners. "Such shelling and artillery firing I have never heard or known," reported one rebel officer (p.162). The Federals, with their more accurate and coordinated fire, won that contest, as they did the "murderous" infantry firefight that raged through the day. An Iowa soldier called the battlefield "a perfect slaughter pen" (pp.176-77). Casualty rates on the day were sixteen and thirteen percent, respectively, for the Federals and

Confederates.

Besides his well-written narrative, based on research in over forty archives from New York to California, Shea furthers our understanding of the campaign and battle with seventeen excellent maps and forty-one photographs. The maps range in scope from a broad strategic view of the Ozark Plateau, stretching across northwest Arkansas and southwest Missouri, to detailed tactical renderings that mark the position of each regiment and battery. Most of the photographs are portraits of the principal Union and Confederate commanders, but Shea also includes a half-dozen contemporary views of the battlefield, photographed by himself. Clearly, he has not only read every available scrap of written evidence about Prairie Grove, but he has also tramped and “read” the “fields of blood” themselves. He has also lived with this battle for some time, his first brief account of the action having been published sixteen years ago.

One must strain to find any significant flaws in Shea’s treatment of Prairie Grove. As a history geek, I would have liked a bit more about the historiography of the campaign and the war in Arkansas generally. The index could have been more detailed, too. For instance, there is no entry for “guerrillas” or “bushwhackers,” even though Shea devotes some space to their activities, important activities, too, by the end of 1862. Still, a good book rises above such minor defects, as well as the inflated expectations of idiosyncratic reviewers. This one surely does.

Daniel E. Sutherland, a professor of history at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, is the author or editor of thirteen books about nineteenth-century U. S. history. His most recent publication is A Savage Conflict: The Decisive Role of Guerrillas in the American Civil War (University of North Carolina Press, 2009).