

Shiloh and the Western Campaign of 1862

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Review

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Shiloh and the Course of the Civil War

Long before *Shiloh and the Western Campaign of 1862* appeared in print, personnel associated with Shiloh National Military Park were aware of the scholarly work of O. Edward Cunningham pertaining to that battle. Studying under the renowned historian T. Harry Williams at Louisiana State University, Cunningham generated a battle study that in many ways was ahead of its time for its insights and analyses. In the intervening years the examination has held up well, even in the face of recent scholarship that has tended to reinforce rather than overturn the then-younger scholar's assessments. Now, thanks to the editorial efforts of Gary D. Joiner and Timothy B. Smith, Cunningham's dissertation is available to a wider audience of students of the American Civil War.

The campaign that culminated in the battle of Shiloh or Pittsburg Landing came at a crucial moment in the nascent life of the Confederate States of America. Following in the wake of the earlier setbacks at Mill Springs, Kentucky, New Madrid, Missouri, and Forts Henry and Donelson in Tennessee, the campaign offered at least the chance for Albert Sidney Johnston to obtain a redemptive victory against his Federal opponents. Cunningham's work ably demonstrates the obstacles that the Confederates encountered in attempting to carry out this mission in a generally wooded and ravine-broken terrain along the Tennessee River. In the process, the author presents alternatives to some of the accepted standards of Shiloh history, from the importance of the Peach Orchard-Hornet's Nest area within the larger struggle near Pittsburg Landing to the nature of the sunken road and the number of attacks and artillery pieces the Southerners ultimately brought to bear against it.

The nature of this early contest in the war's Western Theater comes through compellingly in the narrative as units pour into the maelstrom and combatants strain to determine the dispositions and objectives of the foes they face. Cunningham also illustrates that the hard war to come in the latter stages of the conflict was already showing signs of having arrived in 1862. He recounts several instances of individuals from both sides being shot down in the heat of battle when they might otherwise have been spared.

It is certainly appropriate that since Cunningham tackled some of the most firmly entrenched beliefs about the conduct of the battle that the editors have chosen to allow the author to make his own case. The editing is unobtrusive as it should be. As one of the editors, Timothy Smith was no doubt especially sensitive to this revision of Shiloh, having done much in his own right and in more recent years to dispel myths and misconceptions associated with the engagement. His personal efforts surely informed his assessment of Cunningham's conclusions and shaped his editorial contributions to this volume.

Joiner and Smith also broadened the scope of Cunningham's writing and research by providing additional sources to the footnotes and bibliography that update those endeavors. They have cited more recent scholarship with elaboration where necessary for context or explanation of the direction that subsequent scholarly work has taken. As such, the publication blends the path-breaking efforts Cunningham undertook originally, while allowing the reader to benefit from the other studies that have followed since that time. Thirty-two maps enhance the text, providing a strategic overview as well as breaking down the action on the tactical level on the battlefield as it transpired. An additional map of the brief engagement at Fallen Timbers between pursuing Union forces and Confederate cavalry under Colonel Nathan Bedford Forrest would also have proved useful.

That the author challenged the contention that the Confederate assaults on and the Federal defense of the Hornet's Nest were ultimately less critical to the outcome of the battle is less important than his ability to demonstrate that Shiloh, like all such engagements, was a complexity of chaos and confusion for the officers and men of both sides who participated in it. However, even with his careful and thorough examination of the engagement as a whole, the Cunningham treatment falls into the common tendency of rendering the second day's action almost anti-climatic as the Confederate tide recedes, although he carries the campaign once more to Corinth, Mississippi, in a final chapter.

Letters, diaries and military and newspaper reports provide the foundation for most Civil War campaign studies, but the editors note Cunningham's use of the battlefield itself and the monuments and tablets that the surviving participants and veterans' groups erected as sources of information concerning the engagement. Of course, this reliance on such resources presents the same problems that are associated with soldier memoirs that appeared many years after the fact and often contained self-serving revisionism. In any case, it is the nature of the geographic features of the ground itself and not the location of individual markers and monuments that gives the battlefield its significance to the historian.

O. Edward Cunningham's study of one of the Civil War's prominent engagements adds substantially to the literature of the war and the Western Theater. Joiner and Smith are to be commended for bringing the volume with its unique perspective and interpretations to more bookshelves than would ever otherwise have been possible, ensuring that discussions concerning this important battle and campaign will continue.

Brian Steel Wills, Asbury Professor of History at The University of Virginia's College at Wise is the author of numerous works relating to the American Civil War, including A Battle From the Start: The Life of Nathan Bedford Forrest, reprinted as The Confederacy's Greatest Cavalryman: Nathan Bedford Forrest, The War Hits Home: The Civil War in Southeastern Virginia, (Virginia, 2001), and Gone with the Glory: The Civil War in Cinema (Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).