

Braxton Bragg: The Most Hated Man In The Confederacy

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Review

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Hess, Earl J. *Braxton Bragg: The Most Hated Man in the Confederacy*. University of North Carolina Press, \$35.00 ISBN 9781469628752

From Infamy to Intrigue: Braxton Bragg Revised

One of Earl Hess's great gifts as an author is that he can take a topic we all talk about but which tend to be inglorious—fortifications, infantry tactics, rifled muskets—and then creates essential contributions to our Civil War libraries. He has done so again with his latest endeavor, a biography of *Braxton Bragg: The Most Hated Man in the Confederacy*.

“One need only mention [Bragg's] name at a Civil War round table meeting to bring a guffaw from someone who will make a snide comment about the general,” Hess writes in his prologue, explaining the fundamental problem of writing about his subject (xi). Yet Hess rightfully contends that Bragg was “a complex and important individual who deserves much more from students and historians than to be made the butt of unfounded ridicule” (xix).

The challenge Hess lays out for himself with the book—and for readers—sounds deceptively simple: “We have to approach Bragg from a clear perspective and take him for what he was while rejecting the old image that has become a comforting but unfair view of the man and his military career” (xiii).

Hess does this by effectively aggregating dozens of wildly diverse contemporary opinions about Bragg, which he then sifts through, organizes, and insightfully assesses. He also outlines the historiography of Bragg biography, then draws on that historiography throughout the book to contextualize his own assessments. The resulting work is not, as Hess admits, a full-fledged biography but rather a careful and more objective analysis of Bragg's Civil War career.

However, Hess does draw enough detail from the rest of Bragg's life to give his study firm grounding. As the owner of a mid-sized Louisiana sugar

plantation, Bragg devoted himself to the Confederate cause because of his own entrenchment within the Confederate plantation culture. “Like most Southerners, Bragg considered the peculiar institution of slavery to be not so peculiar at all,” Hess writes (10). Hess also uses the “ardent & devoted” relationship between Bragg and his wife as an important lens (5).

Bragg is best known—and scorned with relish—for the maelstrom of bad blood between him and his subordinates. “His record of success while shaping the Army of Tennessee and leading it longer than any other individual was severely tarnished and corrupted by the controversies that erupted from his ill-advised dealings with recalcitrant officers,” Hess laments (xx). Hess walks readers through each of these many controversies, playing fair-handed referee.

Of particular note is Hess’s excellent treatment of the controversy that arose following Bragg’s failed Kentucky campaign in October of 1862. An eventual split between Bragg and former Vice President John C. Breckenridge, a Kentuckian, had its seeds in the campaign, as well—one of many relationships that would sour over the course of Bragg’s tenure. Hess carefully traces both sides of the long-running feud until eventually—surprisingly—it mellowed after the war.

As anyone familiar with Bragg knows, one might pick any number of his subordinates as a case study in high-profile, long-running rancor: Benjamin Cheatham, William Hardee, Leonidas Polk, D. H. Hill, James Longstreet, and on. Hess gives air to their grievances, but he reminds readers that they were often “willful, unreliable subordinates who could not be counted on to obey orders or cooperate with their commander” (168). Bragg’s problems, in short, were not all of Bragg’s making. “Historians have tended to see Bragg as the actor in creating a circle of negativity around him,” Hess says of these controversies, “but we must also understand that he was in turn deeply affected by the actions and opinions of others” (xii). Hess gives everyone a fair hearing, but the cumulative effect is that Bragg deserves more benefit of the doubt than critics have generally given him.

One of the book’s great strengths is that Hess assigns blame and credit equally, for everyone concerned, and only when due. This is particularly admirable when writing about a subject like Bragg, who becomes such easy sport for detractors. “The deep and intense controversies about his generalship have unfortunately had the effect of dehumanizing Bragg,” Hess observes (xi).

Bragg did little to help his own cause, either, particularly after the war when so many of his peers took to the pen. Aborted attempts at writing histories and memoirs transformed Bragg into “a literary recluse.” “There is no substitute for a general’s postwar view of his career,” Hess contends; “Bragg should have written his memoirs and braved whatever criticism came his way in the same fashion he braved the storm of abuse directed at him during the war” (262). Compounding the problems Bragg’s legacy would face were his mixed war record and his tendency to find it easier “to reconcile with his former war enemies than with his Confederate colleagues” (256).

Bragg’s reputation is not apt to suddenly undergo a Renaissance—150 years of entrenched preconceptions is too much for any one book to overcome—but Hess’s sympathetic but balanced reassessment should give readers ample reason to reconsider any long-held assumptions and prejudices. In his prologue, Hess suggested that he wanted to craft a study that would transform Bragg “from a cardboard figure into a real person with admirable personal qualities as well as distressing personal faults” (xii). *Braxton Bragg* succeeds in recasting “the most hated man in the Confederacy” into one of the most interesting.

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