

Kill Jeff Davis: The Union Raid On Richmond, 1864

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Review

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Venter, Bruce M. *Kill Jeff Davis: The Union Raid on Richmond, 1864.* University of Oklahoma Press, \$29.95 ISBN 9780806151533

Ambition's End: The Union Raid on Richmond, 1864

In late February of 1864, not quite four thousand Union cavalymen, commanded by the memorably whiskered Brigadier General Hugh Judson Kilpatrick, bolted south from Stevensburg, Virginia, on a singular sortie aimed at the Confederate capital. “Beyond an ostensible aim of freeing some thirteen thousand Union men held at Libby Prison and on Belle Isle,” author and independent historian Bruce M. Venter writes, “the raiders had a much more sinister objective—the assassination of the Confederacy’s chief executive and members of his cabinet” (xiv-xv). With this book, a recent addition to the University of Oklahoma Press’s “Campaigns & Commanders” series, Venter offers a comprehensive narrative of the Kilpatrick-Dahlgren Raid, making thorough use of some recondite archival sources.

Venter situates his account of the Kilpatrick-Dahlgren raid in its larger military context. After an opening chapter that introduces readers to Kilpatrick (“not the solipsist that some modern-day critics like to portray”), the author briefly reviews the significance of Civil War cavalry “raiding,” which became “one of the primary functions” of mounted Union and Confederate soldiers (11, 13). Venter then chronicles the luckless, early February 1864 effort (conducted by Brigadier General Isaac Wistar from Benjamin Butler’s Army of the James) to raid Richmond and empty its ill-famed military prisons. The failure of this endeavor proved something of a boon for Kilpatrick, who, “searching for an enterprise that promised maximum national attention,” scarcely had to persuade President Lincoln of the wisdom of a “raid similar to Butler’s but promising better results” (57-60). Nonetheless, the plan met with the considered skepticism of both Alfred Pleasonton and George Meade’s staff officer, Lieutenant Colonel Theodore Lyman (90-91).

The book tracks the progress of the main raiding columns—Kilpatrick’s column, which trotted through Spotsylvania and Beaver Dam Station before attacking Richmond, and Colonel Ulric Dahlgren’s column, which dashed into Goochland County before bending back to King and Queen County, located north and east of Richmond. Venter likewise considers George Armstrong Custer’s efforts to “draw the attention” of Lee’s army “toward Charlottesville” (112).

Ultimately, the raid failed—a result that Venter attributes to “bad weather, command and control issues, ignorance of terrain, logistical mishaps, and nearly a total lack of secrecy” (259). Equally important, the author rejects the conventional wisdom that “a ragtag bunch of old men, schoolboys, invalids, and government clerks” was all that stood between the federals and Richmond (260-261). In addition, Venter contends that the entire effort “was too ambitious,” succumbing to myriad contingencies and a subordinate (Dahlgren) whose “command experience was scant” (263, xvi).

Indeed, Dahlgren’s death in King and Queen County would ignite both a contemporary “firestorm” and enduring historical intrigue (242). “Stationery sheets” discovered on Dahlgren’s lifeless body made clear the young colonel’s conviction: “Jeff Davis and Cabinet must be killed on the spot” (242). In the book’s final chapter, Venter offers a succinct review of the scholarly debates about both the authorship and validity of the Dahlgren Papers.

The author is a prose stylist, and he delivers a narrative teeming with vivid descriptions and extended biographical vignettes. No character is introduced without a colorful train of adjectives. Troopers variously embark on a “soggy jaunt,” deliver a “plunging crossfire,” and “gnash some hardtack” before “a bleary-eyed but fast-gaited ride” (5, 41, 115). Take, for example, the opening sentence of Chapter One: as cavalymen advanced down “a sloppy road,” the “horses’ hooves splash[ed] mud on every animal’s belly and each rider’s stirrups, boots, and uniform trousers” (3). Or take this description from the beginning of the raid: “By the time the 1st Vermont, bringing up the rear guard, finally left Stevensburg about 7:00 P.M., the sky was black but for a dim rim of light at the western horizon” (99). Imagination is ineluctably at work in any historical narrative, but it may work overtime here.

In any work of this scope, there will be a minor error or two. The author, for example, incorrectly identifies the artilleryist Dunbar Ransom as “Duncan”

Ransom (97). But that should hardly detract from the many accomplishments of this impressively researched account. Based on diligent work in manuscripts, newspapers, and local and national archives, Venter expertly navigates “the raid’s dense forest of subterfuge and surmise” (271). Any student of the war’s military history—or its cavalry operations in particular—will want to add this volume to their library.

Brian Matthew Jordan is assistant professor of history at Sam Houston State University. His book, Marching Home: Union Veterans and Their Unending Civil War (2015), was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in History.