

Theater Of A Separate War: The Civil War West Of The Mississippi River, 1861--1865

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Review

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Cutrer, Thomas W. *Theater of a Separate War: The Civil War West of the Mississippi River, 1861–1865*. University of North Carolina Press, \$40.00 ISBN 9781469631561

A Region Remembered: Martial Conflict Beyond the Mississippi

Despite the ever-expanding body of literature available today about the Civil War, a vast gap remains unfilled about the Trans-Mississippi theater and the role it played in determining the outcome of the great conflict. In *Theater of a Separate War: The Civil War West of the Mississippi River, 1861-1865*, Thomas Cutrer offers students of military history an introductory text about the martial aspects of the Trans-Mississippi region. This single volume history is not meant to act as an all-inclusive work on every aspect of the vast region west of the Mississippi; instead, Cutrer offers his reader a detailed yet brief overview of each major battle or campaign within the great expanse of the war's forgotten region. Each chapter stands alone, in essence creating an anthology history of the Theater. Combat in the Indian Territory receives much wanted attention, as does the role of Native peoples within the context of the both sides of the conflict. The one region that receives the most attention is Louisiana, and especially those actions related to the Red River Campaign; Cutrer breaks the campaign into three separate chapters in order to give deeper analysis of Banks' efforts to secure Louisiana for the Union.

The body of the book is expertly crafted and holds the attention of the reader. That cannot be said, however, of the Introduction and Conclusion sections. Both sections contain examples of poor editing which detracts from the overall feel of the work. On page seven, Cutrer writes, The combat experienced by troops in the trans-Mississippi was perhaps less arduous than that of the Army of Northern Virginia, the Army of the Potomac, the Army of Tennessee, or the Army of the Tennessee, but they operated efficiently under peculiar difficulties unknown east of the Mississippi, and deserved major credit for their courage,

their perseverance, and their self- sacrifice. Following the initial enthusiasm for service in Virginia, most trans- Mississippi soldiers expressed their ardent preference for returning to or remaining in their home region. Political representatives bitterly resented seeing their region’s resources for defense – human and material – requisitioned by the Davis administration for service east of the river. (7)

This same material is included nearly verbatim in the final paragraph on page ten. [. . .] The combat experienced by troops in the trans-Mississippi was less arduous than that of the Army of Northern Virginia, the Army of the Potomac, the Army of Tennessee, or the Army of the Tennessee. They operated efficiently, however, under peculiar difficulties unknown east of the Mississippi, and deserved major credit for their courage, their perseverance, and their self-sacrifice. Following the initial enthusiasm for service in Virginia, most trans-Mississippi soldiers expressed their ardent preference for returning to or remaining in their home region. Political representatives bitterly resented seeing their region’s resources for defense – human and material – requisitioned by the Davis administration for service east of the river. (10)

The section of paragraph on page ten is then followed by a concluding sentence, which is also repeated verbatim as the first sentence of the paragraph starting on page eleven.

As mentioned, another example, although smaller in magnitude, occurs in the Conclusion. On page 443, Cutrer describes logistics within the theater as being “at the end of a long and tenuous line of supply . . .” He recycles that clause closely two paragraphs later on the same page. Here, the Trans-Mississippi is at “the terminus of a long and tenuous supply line . . .” (443)

These examples do not detract from the research used for the rest throughout the rest of the book. Unfortunately, they do call into question the editing done within the volume, as well as the work done in the writing of what are traditionally seen as the final portions of a project committed to paper. All readers and writers understand that word choice and editing provide a substantial challenge throughout the creative process. Letting such egregious examples pass through to the final volume reflect poorly upon not just the author, but upon the University of North Carolina Press as well.

For those looking for an entry point into the military actions of the Trans-Mississippi theater, the flaws should not prove to be a major distraction. This is a serviceable volume for just such a task, which is what Cutrer claims it to be. For those seeking a deeper dive into various battles of the Far West, this book also provides an introduction to available sources and the materials necessary to further investigate battles fought in that mysterious theater beyond the Great River.

Robert Welch is an adjunct instructor within the South Dakota Board of Regents system. He resides in Vermillion, South Dakota. His current research concerns Company C of the 78th Illinois Infantry and its complex connections with McDonough County, Illinois, where it was raised.