

Generals South Generals North: The Commanders of the Civil War Reconsidered

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Recommended Citation

Greene, A. Wilson (2011) "Generals South Generals North: The Commanders of the Civil War Reconsidered," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.13.3.05

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol13/iss3/21>

Review

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Summer 2011

Axelrod, Alan *Generals South Generals North: The Commanders of the Civil War Reconsidered*. Lyons Press, \$27.95 ISBN 978-0-7627-6149-4

If Generals Received Grades

I can just imagine the pitch delivered by the agent to the publisher: "The Civil War Sesquicentennial is almost here. It will inspire legions of Americans to take an interest in the period and all of them will be looking for entry-level books to get them started. How about a collection of mini-biographies of twenty-four leading Civil War generals, each commander rated on a basis of one to four stars, including lively summaries of all the campaigns in which they fought? We will include illustrations, historic photos, and battle maps. This book will jump off the shelf!"

I have no knowledge, of course, why Lyons Press decided to publish *Generals South Generals North* but I assume that they saw an opportunity to market what is essentially an innovative mini encyclopedia to a general readership with a new interest in the Civil War. The fundamental requirement of any such publication, however, is that the information it presents is factual. It is apparent that the publisher failed to send this manuscript to readers familiar with Civil War history because *Generals South Generals North* is riddled with errors of fact and laced with questionable interpretation rendering it one of the worst books dealing with Civil War military history this reviewer has ever endured.

Alan Axelrod examines twelve Confederate and twelve Union generals, providing a brief evaluation of their command competence, a summary of their military experience in battle, and a rather lengthy biographical sketch including their pre- and post-Civil War lives. The biographical narratives incorporate descriptions of the major Civil War campaigns in which each general participated. Axelrod devotes so much space to this aspect of his work that it is apparent he intended to provide readers with an overview of the military conduct

of the war, in addition to simply amplifying the performance of his highlighted commanders. Each of his twenty-four subjects receives a rating as to his performance in the war—ranging from one to four stars, splitting the difference between stars in many cases (and assigning Albert Sidney Johnston an incomplete).

It is tempting to quibble with the author's judgment as to who were the twenty-four men "who had the greatest impact on the course and outcome of the war" and his evaluation of them (vii). Axelrod does tend to focus on Union generals who fought in the Eastern Theater and his omission of men such as Patrick Cleburne and Benjamin Butler in favor of John Hunt Morgan and Winfield Scott struck me as questionable. But there is nothing egregiously objectionable about Axelrod's choice of generals or his overall rating of their performance. In fact, the brief "Evaluation" sections that lead each sketch are the strongest element of his format. There is little outside of the standard stereotype in Axelrod's assessments (with the exception of a refreshingly balanced judgment on Ambrose Burnside) but neither is there much with which seasoned readers would quarrel.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the long narratives that form the bulk of Axelrod's entries. Outlandish errors of fact, sweeping generalizations positing highly debatable conclusions, and numerous subtle but troubling interpretations of battles and events litter not only every entry but virtually every page. Readers even moderately familiar with the literature on the war will be left wondering where on earth Axelrod found the basis for many of his fantastic assertions. There is a brief bibliography including a dozen "General Works" and a reasonably comprehensive listing of published biographies of each of his subjects but no listing of battle studies. None of his entries are documented, leaving readers wondering about the origins of his many quotations as well as anecdotes of dubious veracity.

A few examples of these problems will have to suffice, although it would be possible to fill many pages with the mistakes that I noted in one brief reading. Axelrod has John Floyd surrendering the Confederate army at Fort Donelson, when one of the best-known aspects of that engagement was the abdication of both Floyd and his second-in-command, Gideon Pillow, to Simon Buckner; we learn that, at the beginning of the battle of Shiloh, Grant was in his headquarters tent next to Shiloh Church (Grant, of course, was miles downstream in the Cherry Mansion in Savannah, Tennessee when the battle commenced); and he

explains that at the battle of Brice's Cross Roads, Nathan Bedford Forrest placed his troops at the intersection looking for an opportunity to attack the Federals, when in truth, it was the Federal army that occupied Brice's Cross Roads. Axelrod thinks that Glendale and Bermuda Hundred were towns in Virginia, has Stuart's ride around McClellan during the Peninsula Campaign lasting five weeks, and places Lynchburg in the Shenandoah Valley.

Many readers would question Axelrod's assertion that the fighting at Yellow Tavern "shatter[ed] the myth of the invincibility of the Confederate cavalry" or that the main purpose of Longstreet's Suffolk Campaign was to interdict "Union attempts to gain a landing place for seaborne action against the Army of Northern Virginia" (279, 120). Claims that Sickles occupied the Peach Orchard at Gettysburg to avenge the removal of his friend, Joseph Hooker, from command of the Army of the Potomac or that the rationale behind the Grand Review of May 1865 was to defuse the outrage felt by Sherman's men as a result of criticisms leveled by Secretary of War Edwin Stanton are without basis in fact.

Many students of the war would challenge Axelrod's assertions that it is "safe to say" that Albert Sidney Johnston "is the single most controversial major commander to emerge from the Civil War" or that Secretary of War Jefferson Davis intentionally top-loaded the leadership of the 2nd U.S. Cavalry with Southern officers in 1855 to prepare a ready-made elite unit for use in a civil war (53). Is it really true that James Longstreet is "widely considered the finest corps commander on either side of the Civil War" (103)?

Axelrod writes well. The nature of his format leads to much redundancy in the various narratives as campaigns are described in multiple entries but Axelrod finds the words to make each segment flow nicely. The historic photographs are well-chosen, if occasionally mistakenly captioned, but the very generalized maps of selected battle actions that accompany each sketch leave almost as much to be desired as do the narratives, as they are error-laden as well.

Quite simply, this is a book that should never have seen the light of day—at least in the shape in which it was published. Lyons Press should be encouraged to employ fact-checkers before they release an encyclopedia and Alan Axelrod should, perhaps, bone up on the Civil War a little more before he undertakes his next military history.

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