

# Petersburg to Appomattox: The End of the War in Virginia

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## Review

**Keller, Christian B.**

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**Janney, Caroline E., ed.** *Petersburg to Appomattox: The End of the War in Virginia*. University of North Carolina Press, \$35.00 ISBN 9781469640761

In this latest installment of UNC Press's Military Campaigns of the Civil War series, Caroline E. Janney has made a strong mark for herself as Gary W. Gallagher's literary successor. Most readers will be familiar with the storied list of previous titles in the series, the last of which on the end of the Overland Campaign and the Siege of Petersburg saw Janney and Gallagher team up as co-editors. That was a fine volume. This one is possibly even better.

One big reason this book succeeds is the uniform quality of writing among the nine essays, which range from traditional military analyses of Grant's and Sheridan's roles to more socio-cultural topics, such as how African-Americans reacted to Lee's surrender. It is a true mix of sub-niches within the subfield of Civil War history, but the variety of historians and essays—a hallmark of Gallagher's previously edited works—provides a satisfyingly rich texture without going overboard on “drums and trumpets” or losing oneself in the weeds of micro-history. As one currently editing his own anthology, I can certainly attest to the difficulty of striking the happy balance.

Janney should be congratulated for doing that, but also for the overall crispness, and, in places, eloquence of the prose. For instance, Stephen Cushman, an English professor at the University of Virginia and frequent associate to Gallagher and other historians, wrote a well-researched chapter on Sheridan's *Personal Memoirs* as they relate to the Appomattox Campaign that is, at times, literarily lyrical. Equally well-written and researched is Keith Bohannon's examination of the destruction of Rebel records after the fall of Richmond and during the march westward, a subject hardly explored in previous literature but rather cogent for those who read and write about the Confederacy. We learn, for example, that Lee's headquarters wagon containing much of his wartime correspondence was burned near Sailor's Creek, a devastating loss not only for the general but also for future chroniclers. Readers will also enjoy delving deeply into Jack Davis's account of the political machinations of Lee, Secretary of War John C.

Breckinridge, and Assistant Secretary of War John A. Campbell in the final weeks of the war as they tried, against the wishes of their president, to achieve a last-minute peace deal with the Union. Davis (the author) delivers his usual outstanding combination of first-rate primary source research and gripping prose, but so too do Susannah Ural in her piece on Texas soldiers' and civilians' morale during the final months of the war (spoiler alert: it was much higher than we might expect) and Pete Carmichael's study of what really went wrong for the Confederates at Five Forks. All of these essays exemplify the excellent writing that pervades, and, in this reviewer's opinion, defines the book.

That does not imply, however, that the other essayists wrote weaker chapters. Far from it. William Bergen, an independent scholar living in Charlottesville, starts the book off with a nuanced and careful evaluation of Ulysses S. Grant's generalship, giving him (correctly) the lion's share of credit for creating the conditions—both in his own army and for Lee—that resulted in the meeting in the McClean House parlor. Wayne Wei-Siang Hsieh of the U.S. Naval Academy once again demonstrates his facility in command history with a powerfully-argued chapter extolling the indispensable and efficacious Federal cavalry under the leadership of Philip Sheridan, who in 1865 understood better than any other leader how to leverage technology and esprit-de-corps to achieve wondrous results on the battlefield. And Janney herself, in a novel piece examining the surrender of Lee's soldiers *after* Appomattox (there were thousands of them, over three months, across several states) and Elizabeth Varon, whose essay on black southerners' period and postwar celebrations of the surrender ably closes out the collection, both offer refreshingly new, previously unstudied topics that should raise a few eyebrows.

About half of the contributors seem to have drawn some of their research and conclusions from their own previous publications, but in each likely case the overlap fails to detract from the strength of the essay. The original archival work demonstrated in the notes of nearly all the chapters speaks for itself and future scholars will turn to it with profit. There is some cutting-edge stuff here, especially in the research of the more social-cultural topics.

The maps, designed by the redoubtable Hal Jespersen, are quite good and should clarify for readers less familiar with the Appomattox Campaign what the major contours looked like and where and when the key events occurred. There are only three of them, however, two of which deal with Five Forks. It would have been interesting to have seen a graphic depiction of

Janney's post-Appomattox surrenders and/or the tactical situation on the morning of April 9, 1865, which several of the authors allude to. But these are nitpicks.

Some final thoughts: keeping in line with previous titles in the Military Campaigns series, editor Janney wrote a strong introduction and bibliographic essay that students at any level would appreciate. Conspicuously absent in the latter are references to primary and secondary works on the chief policymakers, Lincoln and Davis, as well as James Longstreet and Richard S. Ewell, both of whom played major roles in the final days of their army. Nitpicks again, to be sure, but noticeable.

Lastly, some readers may be frustrated by the eclectic nature of the chapters' subject matter, but such has been a characteristic of this series since its infancy many years ago. Those seeking a smooth, contiguous narrative of the final days of the war in Virginia should look elsewhere, but for a well-balanced, elegantly-written, and surprisingly comprehensive collection of essays written by some of the best Civil War historians practicing today, look no further.

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