

Upon the Fields of Battle: Essays in the Military History of America's Civil War

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Recommended Citation

Reid, Brian Holden (2019) "Upon the Fields of Battle: Essays in the Military History of America's Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 21 : Iss. 3 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol21/iss3/6>

Review

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Summer 2019

Bledsoe, Andrew S. and Andrew F. Lang, eds. *Upon the Fields of Battle: Essays in the Military History of America's Civil War.* Louisiana State University Press, 2018 \$48.00 ISBN 9780807169773

In recent years Civil War historians have been engaged in some soul-searching as to the direction and indeed content of their studies. Old patterns of thought have been discarded and new ones have been adopted; but to what effect, indeed to what end? To some degree such questions have been prompted by the very success and expansion of military history in general since the 1950s, the growth in the number of its practitioners and the sheer variety of programmes available for the interested student. Yet success has come at a price and led to some self-doubt. And within the United States, criticism of American military adventures abroad since 2003 has reflected adversely on the field, as military history hardly lacks connection to the US agencies of government. The editors of this volume, both younger scholars and assistant professors at Lee and Mississippi State Universities, have put together a volume to assess the nature of the latest research on the Civil War.

One important issue that Bledsoe and Lang identify in their stimulating and in some ways challenging introductory essay, 'Military History and the American Civil War,' is the gradual erosion of any significant distinction between the home front and the battlefield (in a civil war after all, they are virtually synonymous). Civil War historians (including this one) now dilate on 'the complicated processes of emancipation', discuss 'the meaning of freedom in a white republic' and consider the important processes that transformed the character of the Civil War, among other important points of interpretation. This has led to a broadening as well as a deepening of the kind of military history that Civil War historians consider their province. But here a difficulty emerges. The broader the subject becomes, the more likely its traditional elements – operational military history, strategy, tactics and the conduct of the war – will be dismissed as either 'old-fashioned', or worse, marginalized by pernicious euphemism.

The polemical heart of this book is to be found in Earl Hess' chapter, 'Revitalizing Traditional Military History in the Current Age of Civil War Studies'. A prolific and genuinely thoughtful and productive scholar, Hess has addressed this issue in previous essays and conference presentations (one of which I attended in 2015 and appears to have spawned this book). Hess' main anxiety is that social aspects of war-making, notably 'memory studies', are threatening to draw attention away from operational military history. 'The social and cultural turn that hit civil war studies with a wallop by the 1990s had a strong tendency to draw attention mostly to civilian society at war rather than applying social or cultural perspectives to the armed forces' (p. 21). Hess has a point here, for the latter tendency resulted from the 'war and society' approach, one pioneered by Sir Michael Howard and his pupils on both sides of the Atlantic, that ultimately led to an improvement in the quality of operational military published in all fields. Few Civil War historians would disagree with Hess' conviction that operational military history 'is an old, hallowed, and still important part of the field in its own right' (pp. 20-21).

The editors are not necessarily dedicated to this cause. They do not want to refight old battles. They desire their book to push 'the boundaries of the current state of the field through innovative methodologies and fresh questions'. They also hope that such efforts will 'underscore the explanatory power of military history in general and this volume in particular' (p.6). Do the authors succeed, do they bring fresh perspectives to their subjects? They certainly bring new perspectives to bear albeit with mixed results. Kenneth Noe's analysis of George B. McClellan's battle with the elements during the Peninsula Campaign is full of fascinating detail, but he is surprisingly reluctant to draw firm general conclusions about the overall significance of bad weather in this campaign. Certainly, it 'cannot be dismissed' (p. 63), but if McClellan's efforts were predestined to fail thanks to the awful conditions in which the Army of the Potomac floundered - which contradicts the editors' earlier emphasis on the importance of contingency - we have no choice but to fall back on McClellan's apologia that the failure had nothing to do with him. I also enjoyed Jennifer Murray's exploration of George G. Meade's fumbling efforts at pursuit after Gettysburg. She attempts to place these within the context of exaggerated notions of what a 'decisive battle' might achieve. She brings some sense to this discussion, but it is limited by some confusion over the precise meaning of the terms, attrition and annihilation (perhaps inherited from Russell F. Weigley). Bledsoe's contribution on Braxton Bragg's debacle at McLemore's Cove in September 1863 is also a nicely judged analysis which reflects on the vagueness of his orders to a hapless subordinate, Thomas C. Hindman. Bragg proved unable to express his

intent or what he expected his subordinates to achieve; errors he would repeat at Chickamauga. All three of these contributions would have benefitted from some maps.

John J. Hennessy also makes a genuine contribution to an understanding of the Civil War's conduct with his reconsideration of the bombardment and looting of Fredericksburg which did not infringe the laws of war. Most of the remaining essays reflect interest in a major growth area, namely, the soldiers' experience of the war. One of the best essays in the book is Keith Altavilla's discussion of Democrats in the Union Army in 1864. Brian M. Jordan's discussion of the 107th Ohio Volunteer Infantry, a German regiment, is thought-provoking because he maintains that for the veterans 'the pain of the war became a profound source of their pride' in their performance at Gettysburg. He makes a strong case that these soldiers were *not* 'victims' who suffered 'needlessly' (p. 265). In so doing he brings up another polemical issue not explored by Hess – the 'dark turn' in Civil War scholarship. This reflects a preoccupation with suffering, death, trauma and the hard, callous hand of war, which has tended to replace what Jordan calls 'our once-congratulatory narratives' (p. 254). This is hardly a new development. I had noticed in book reviews 20 years ago the mournful tone, depressing black imagery and the adoption of the British language and style of Remembrance 1914-18 plus a preoccupation with the futility of it all. There is even a mention (p. 265) of a 'lost generation'. Such gloomy perspectives have encouraged the flight from operational military history bemoaned by Hess. These are ironical developments because not only is the 'dark turn' rather self-indulgent, but it is deeply parochial – though not based on authentic American language employed during and after the war.

The contributors eschew the language of the 'lost generation' and present a measured discussion of the selected aspects of the Civil War that are not based mercifully on 'new methodologies' but on a thorough estimate of the sources. The book also includes a 'memory study', Robert Glaze's fine assessment of Albert Sydney Johnston as a 'lost' leader. Yet for all its qualities, this book has one weakness. To some extent it reflects some of the parochialism and self-absorbed aspects of Civil War historiography that it seeks to refute. There is little realization here that the contributors are dealing with a significant international event – despite Hess' clarion call for more comparative approaches that would place Civil War tactical developments in a broader perspective. Only one contributor, Kevin M. Levin cites recent work by a non-American Civil War scholar (though Paddy Griffith gets an honourable mention in Hess' chapter). There are far too many references to 'our' history as if Civil War history is read only by Americans whereas it is read, enjoyed and debated all over the world. Such a 'parochial turn' needs to be put into sharp reverse.

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