

The Last Battleground: The Civil War Comes to North Carolina

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Review

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Thankfully, history continues to attract a healthy blend of specialists and non-specialists, remaining largely free of the deadening, highly specialized jargon that has consigned many other disciplines to narrow segments of the academy. A visit to almost any bookstore still reveals that works of history, many written by non-academicians, continue to hold considerable space on the shelves. The American Civil War fits comfortably in this diverse world, with some of the conflict's most acclaimed writers—Douglas Southall Freeman, Bruce Catton, and Shelby Foote immediately come to mind—coming from outside the halls of history departments. The present volume, penned by Philip Gerard, a professor of creative writing at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, stands proudly within that tradition.

The Last Battleground consists of forty-three chapters adopted from essays originally published over fifty installments in *Our State: Celebrating North Carolina*, a popular magazine, during the four-year sesquicentennial of the Civil War. Each chapter represents a self-contained story of some aspect of the war involving North Carolina, with an eye toward emphasizing the intensely personal nature of the terrible conflict. As Gerard explains of his original goals (p. ix), “The stories would not be sweeping accounts of regimental maneuvers in battle but personal tales of people making the hardest choices of their lives.” In so doing, the author captures the extraordinary diversity of the war's experiences, with the focus of individual chapters ranging from the famous, such as Confederate general and state Governor Zebulon Baird Vance, a former Unionist, to lesser-known figures like Nancy Leigh Pierson Bennitt, whose two sons died in the war and whose modest parlor hosted the surrender of Joseph E. Johnston to William T. Sherman in May 1865. Having botched a complicated attempt to recapture New Bern, Maj. Gen. George Pickett is harshly criticized for overseeing the hanging of twenty-two captured North Carolinians

who had fought for the Union; by contrast, the secretive and illiterate Abraham Galloway, an escaped slave turned Union spy and recruiter, emerges as a remarkably effective leader who continued the struggle for civil rights until his death in 1870. Runaway slaves, plantation belles, slave auctioneers, those committing atrocities and their victims, Union occupiers of the coast, prisoners, baseball players, churches and chaplains, bandsmen and singers, sailors, architects and railroad men, the Cherokee Legion, U. S. Colored Troops, Fort Fisher, and even the sons of the famous Siamese Twins, Chang and Eng Bunker, who had settled in rural North Carolina following a decade of world tours, round out the pages of this fascinating collection.

As Gerard demonstrates, the experiences of North Carolina and North Carolinians serve as an excellent window into what he dubs (p. 323) “our Great American Mystery: how so many millions of reasonable, decent people could have embarked on such a near-apocalyptic crusade, endured suffering that is unimaginable to most contemporary readers, and inflicted so much cruelty and death on fellow Americans, including their own neighbors.” The last state to secede, North Carolina was bitterly divided over national and local loyalties, slavery, and economic and social class. Desertions from its units were especially high in the Army of Northern Virginia, and the state fielded eight regiments for the Union (four black and four white). Nonetheless, North Carolina raised over eighty regiments for the Confederacy; one of every four Confederate dead at Gettysburg were from North Carolina; six Tar Heel regiments fought at the infamous Battle of the Crater (1864). Some fought in conventional battles, others adopted the grinding, asymmetrical conflicts that engulfed the borderlands between Union and Confederate control in the highlands and near the coast. Explaining why the catastrophe occurred will always remain elusive; to Gerard, it ultimately came down to agonizing personal decisions.

General readers will find in *The Last Battleground* a brilliantly written introduction into the Civil War’s impact on the American people. Indeed, author Gerard’s six years of research, observation, and conversation enabled him to understand many of the war’s complexities. Of course, academic quibblers will be somewhat frustrated by the lack of direct citations (there is a brief bibliography), the use of the present tense to describe past events, and the occasional factual error: for example, though Unionist, the little community of Shelton Laurel was not “Republican to the bone” (p. 86) during the war, as the Republican Party did not yet exist in North Carolina. But the result is nonetheless a sensitive, sympathetic, thoughtful, and often troubling book, one of the most rewarding accounts of Civil War that I’ve read in many years.

Author of The American Military Frontiers: The United States Army in the West, 1783-1900 (2009) and co-editor of Lone Star Blue & Gray: Essays on Texas and the Civil War (2nd edition, 2015), Robert Wooster is Regents Professor of History at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi.