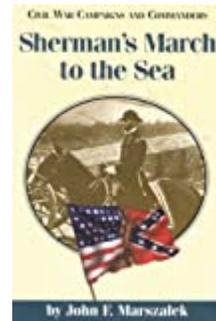




John F. Marszalek. *Sherman's March to the Sea*. Abilene: McWhiney Foundation Press, 2005. 129 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-893114-16-6.



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A Good Place to Start

The McWhiney Foundation Press's Civil War Campaigns and Commanders series is an eclectic series of works written by often-distinguished Civil War historians, for the non-specialist as an introduction to a specific topic. Some of the works focus on individuals, although most focus on either campaigns or battles. John F. Marszalek's *Sherman's March to the Sea* is an excellent addition to the series, written by yet another top-notch scholar and focusing on one of the most significant campaigns of the entire conflict. Marszalek, the Giles Distinguished Professor emeritus of History at Mississippi State University, earned his reputation with excellent biographies of William T. Sherman and Henry W. Halleck.[1] In keeping with the beginner's-level format, there are no footnotes, but there is an excellent bibliography for the reader to pursue further information on Sherman's March.

Marszalek tackles Sherman's March to the Sea of 1864 and its place within the Lost Cause myth. He demonstrates that the simplistic view, which portrays the South as more "virtuous" and the North as using immoral methods to win the war, simply does not hold up to scholarly

scrutiny (p. 13). The truth, he argues, is much more complicated. Marszalek points out that, in fact, Sherman held the South and its people in high esteem. He lived there before the war, and still had many acquaintances. Far from enjoying the destruction he visited upon the south, Sherman's "major purpose for marching to the sea was not to brutalize but to end the war as quickly as possible with the least loss of life" (p. 14).

The idea for the march to the sea did not result from a "Eureka!" moment, it resulted from Sherman's life and military experiences. For example, Marszalek notes that Sherman's experiences at West Point (graduating sixth in the class of 1840) and in the Second Seminole War (1835-42) taught him that wars are "fought not simply between two opposing armies, but between two societies" (pp. 21-22). While stationed in California in the late 1840s, Sherman organized supplies for a boat trip around South America. He also familiarized himself with the importance of logistics while in the army, and in civilian life was a banker, businessman, and superintendent of what eventually became Louisiana State University. These positions stamped on Sherman's mind a crucial understand-

ing of logistics. “In all these roles, Sherman had similar experiences; he realized no matter what the profession, no matter where the locale, society’s cohesion depended on secure patterns of supply. Disrupt such patterns and society becomes disoriented and cannot maintain its unity” (p. 22).

As the Civil War raged, Sherman’s ideas on war and society crystallized, and he made the Meridian (Mississippi) Campaign of early 1864 a laboratory to field test his ideas. The success of the Meridian Campaign “accomplished exactly what Sherman had hoped it would—the wholesale destruction of the infrastructure of the society supporting Confederate forces, without killing a large number of soldiers or civilians. At the same time, the operation demonstrated the weakness of the Confederate military” (pp. 29-30). It left no doubt in Sherman’s mind that this kind of warfare could end the conflict much faster than previously tried methods.

While Marszalek focuses on Sherman, he also discusses the attitudes of Union soldiers toward the march, southern civilians, and African Americans. One of the great myths is that Sherman’s men not only raped the land, but raped many women, both white and black. Marszalek argues that this is false. While not denying that women were raped, he says that rapes and assaults on white women were “rare.” The treatment of black women was undoubtedly worse, but accurate figures of rape and assault are unavailable. Marszalek cites a figure from historian Joseph Glatthaar that shows that soldiers in Sherman’s army averaged 15 cases of venereal disease per 10,000 soldiers (quoted, p. 72). That is four

times lower than the rate of Federal forces in general. While this statistic is not conclusive in and of itself, it does demonstrate that Sherman’s men were not particularly promiscuous. So, in contrast to the myth of Sherman’s hordes raping and pillaging their way across Georgia, the portrait that emerges is quite different. There was tremendous damage done to the economic infrastructure of Georgia and the South in general, but there was not widespread rape and murder. Sherman’s men did not pursue a scorched earth policy, and in fact much of the damage was caused by Confederate forces trying to slow Sherman.

The flaws in *Sherman’s March to the Sea* are few and far between. In one example, Marszalek establishes the background for the campaign, and very briefly alludes to the destruction of Atlanta (p. 17). Perhaps a greater elaboration on how this also fits into the myth of Sherman as a “brute” would have helped establish the context. Additionally, there are several instances in the book in which the city of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania is spelled Pittsburg. These are minor errors that do not detract from the work.

Sherman’s March to the Sea admirably succeeds in its purpose of giving a reader who is unfamiliar with this momentous campaign a good narrative of the events and their place in American history. It is a good place to start.

Note

[1]. John F. Marszalek, *Sherman: A Soldier’s Passion for Order* (New York: Free Press, 1993); and *Commander of All Lincoln’s Armies: A Life of General Henry W. Halleck* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2004).

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