



Edward S. Cooper. *William Babcock Hazen: The Best Hated Man.* Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005. 369 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8386-4089-0.



Reviewed by Jennifer Newman Trevino (Department of History, Auburn University)

Published on H-CivWar (May, 2007)

The Life of William Babcock Hazen

The fascinating life of William Babcock Hazen has long merited a biographical study, which it finds in Edward S. Cooper's book, *William Babcock Hazen: The Best Hated Man*. Cooper portrays Hazen as a strong-willed man who had the ability to make mortal enemies while attempting to accomplish his goals. The title of the book is taken from Ambrose Bierce's quote that Hazen "was the best hated man that I ever knew, and his very memory is a terror to every unworthy soul in the service" (quoted, p. 19). Hazen's desire to take a stand for what he believed to be right, combined with his willingness to step outside the chain of command and risk punishment if he felt as though those in authority over him were acting wrongly, often created animosity between Hazen and others.

Drawing heavily upon the unpublished memoirs of Hazen's wife, Mildred, Cooper argues that Hazen's life "debunks the myth that men who fought side by side in the war had bonded together in a brotherhood" (p. 19). Until the beginning of the Civil War, Hazen's early life was rather commonplace. He grew up on an Ohio farm not far from where James Abram Garfield lived, and the two were lifelong friends. Hazen graduated from West

Point and was stationed in California, Oregon, Washington, and Texas, where he received promotions while fighting the Indians. With the outbreak of the Civil War, Hazen began his more controversial career and made enemies that lasted until his death on January 16, 1887. As he rose through the ranks of the Union Army, he consistently managed to gain negative press coverage and was constantly blamed for things that went wrong. During the Civil War, he was accused by other officers as well as newspapers of fleeing from the battle of Shiloh and was blamed for the loss at Chickamauga. Two of the most prominent enemies he made during the Civil War were William Rosecrans and Philip Sheridan. Hazen had initially alienated George Armstrong Custer at West Point when he arrested Custer. While Hazen was superintendent of Indian affairs, the animosity between himself and Custer as well as Sheridan continued as both "Custer and Sheridan were willing to believe the worst about Hazen" (p. 180). Hazen's controversial life culminated in the postwar years as he brought to light some of the corruption under the presidency of Ulysses S. Grant, especially with his involvement in the impeachment of William Worth Belknap, who was Grant's Secretary of

War. Hazen's career, however, did not end there, as he later served as the chief signal officer. By 1885, President Chester Arthur was pressured by Robert Lincoln, Secretary of War, into court-martialing Hazen, who was blamed for the deaths on the Lady Franklin Bay artic exploration and who had been openly critical of Abraham Lincoln (p. 291). Yet throughout his career, according to Cooper, Hazen pushed for what he believed to be right, even if this meant that he would have to challenge his superiors.

Hazen stood for virtue and righteousness, attacking what he perceived as wrong wherever he found it. Taking a sympathetic approach to Hazen, Cooper presents him as a man who, even though he had a strong temper and did not hesitate to challenge his superiors, was also victimized throughout his life. He opposed military promotions based on political connections. He argued against presidential patronage in appointing cadets from

West Point to military posts under Grant's administration. Later in his life he felt obligated to correct the inaccurate portrayal of the Dakota Territory by the Northern Pacific Railroad in newspapers, which enraged the company. Custer came to the defense of the Northern Pacific Railroad because it provided him with a private car when he traveled and it offered him a chance to oppose Hazen. Although Hazen's flaws are noted throughout the book, Cooper presents him as a person who consistently opposed corruption and stood for uprightness.

This book fills a gap in historical scholarship. It is the first complete biography of William Babcock Hazen and draws upon previously unexamined sources. The book would be of interest to scholars examining both the Western theater of the Civil War as well as Indian affairs in the postwar period. Unfortunately, however, the book could have greatly benefited from closer editing. The definitive Hazen biography has yet to be written.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

Citation: Jennifer Newman Trevino. Review of Cooper, Edward S., *William Babcock Hazen: The Best Hated Man*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. May, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13129>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.