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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jerry Thompson. *Civil War to the Bloody End: The Life and Times of Major General Samuel P. Heintzelman.* College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006. xv + 443 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58544-535-6.



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Published on H-CivWar (July, 2007)

My first thought when asked to review this book was, “Wow! Just what the history profession needs: another biography of still another obscure Civil War general.” In this case, the life and war times of Samuel Peter “Sourdough” Heintzelman, Major General, United States Army. Jerry Thompson, Regents’ Professor at Texas A&M International University in Laredo, ground out four hundred-plus pages about a regular army officer serving in the Civil War. Francis B. Heintzelman’s biographical listing of Heintzelman uses only sixteen lines of text to cover the general’s entire military career, from West Point graduation in July, 1826 (number seventeen in his class), until his death in May, 1880.[1]

But the author has put together an interesting and well-written book about an obstinate and difficult-to-work-with regular army officer in a sea of volunteers. Thompson has made extensive use of archival and manuscript materials, government publications, and published books and articles. He clearly understands his subject without the exaltation that often comes through a biographer who admires the subject under study. He is critical when necessary and willing to praise when required.

The work covers Heintzelman’s military career from West Point graduation through the end of the Civil War. Chapter 1 focuses on the future general’s understanding

of honor and his view of service to his country. He served in the War with Mexico, the trans-Mississippi West and California. His conduct and strict attention to duty won him promotions for “gallantry and meritorious service” at the Battle of Huamantla, Mexico where he was brevetted major (1847) (p. 27) and at the Battle of Fair Oaks, Virginia (1862), where he was promoted to the rank of brigadier general (p. 213). He was promoted to major general as a result of his leadership at the Battle of Williamsburg, Virginia on May 5, 1862. He retired from active service with the permanent rank of major general on February 22, 1869, having served in Texas and the Southeast in the late 1860s.

Heintzelman’s career spanned the period of western expansion, the 1830s through the end of the Civil War. He met and/or worked with some of the most important figures of what used to be called the “Middle Period” of United States History. A careful reading of the text produces names like Kit Carson, Edward Richard Spring Canby, William Tecumseh Sherman and Philip Sheridan, Robert E. Lee, Abraham Lincoln, and Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna. The author also provides an interesting and welcome account of the general’s work near the end of the war and afterward. He was involved with Reconstruction in Texas, spent time in Washington (1867) working with Thaddeus Stevens on the division of Texas

into two states, and New York City, where he joined with “a number of dignitaries assembled to celebrate the creation of Arizona Territory” (p. 345). Heintzelman always believed that he was responsible for the creation of Arizona Territory. There is no doubt that he was influential in the territory’s creation, but it would have happened without his input. He also seems to have misunderstood the nature of the war in New Mexico and was unaware of the presence of California troops under Major General James H. Carleton, who had relieved General Canby in 1862, even though Canby had told Heintzelman that the Confederate threat to the Territory had ended.

Historical researchers of the American Civil War will, after reading this book, have a greater understanding of Major General Samuel P. Heintzelman’s role in the Army of the Potomac and in leading the Union victories at Fair Oaks and other places in Virginia. The general comes

across as the epitome of the Academy graduate whose dedication to honor and service to country makes for greatness; however, it appears that Heintzelman greatly inflated his role in the Army of the Potomac. His greatest contributions to the war came, first at the Battle of Williamsburg, Virginia, May 5, 1862, and at Fair Oaks (Seven Pines), just two weeks later.

Professor Thompson has done the history profession a favor by adding this important biography to the shelves of students of United States military history. It is well recommended.

Note

[1]. Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register of the United States Army, 1789-1903*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1903), vol. 1, 521.

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Citation: Henry Goldman. Review of Thompson, Jerry, *Civil War to the Bloody End: The Life and Times of Major General Samuel P. Heintzelman*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. July, 2007.

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