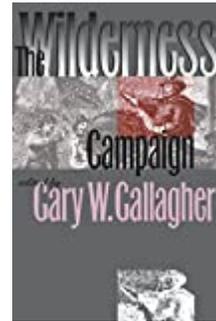


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Gary W. Gallagher, ed. *The Wilderness Campaign*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. xv + 283 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2334-7.



Reviewed by Wayne Mahood (SUNY-Geneseo)

Published on H-CivWar (November, 1997)

Gary W. Gallagher has rounded up an impressive array of scholars to take another look at the 1864 Wilderness campaign. Rather than duplicate Gordon Rhea's near-classic "tactical study" of the battle, Gallagher wanted to "expand understanding of one of the war's major military confrontations" (p. xi). The Wilderness was selected because it "inaugurated an epic confrontation between Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee that would continue unabated until the Army of Northern Virginia surrendered eleven months later at Appomattox Court House" (p. ix). This collection of eight essays examines Union and Confederate expectations in the spring of 1864, analyzes an important test of the armies' high commands, and sifts through conflicting evidence to reinterpret "some of the most gripping incidents of the two days" (p. xi).

Brooks Simpson leads off with an examination of the "Great Expectations" of the northern press regarding the Union army's new leader, Ulysses S. Grant, and the opening of the Wilderness campaign. Like Abraham Lincoln, whom he quotes, Simpson finds it ironic that so little attention was (and has been) paid to the series of successes which opened 100,000 acres in the Western Theater and so much to "a single half-defeat." Relying largely on newspaper coverage of the war, Simpson challenges the usual studies of the campaign, which depend on "rather

traditional standards of victory and defeat" (p. 4). Rather, we can better appreciate the results if we consider "the context of Grant's overall strategy." That is, Grant "re-fashioned" the way the war was to be won by subordinating "the clash of battle to the larger objectives of the campaign" (p. 5).

Generally, this highly readable essay lives up to its promise, demonstrating that Grant's accomplishments were overlooked by a public that expected "another Waterloo," but there is less reliance on northern newspapers than the reader was led to expect, and the marshalling of evidence becomes somewhat tedious toward the end.

Using a number of rather unfamiliar sources that challenge both contemporary and more recent writing, editor Gallagher's essay, "Our Hearts Are Full of Hope," substantiates his claim that the morale of Confederate soldiers was surprisingly high in spring 1864. Soldiers' letters consistently show "a loyalty to the Confederacy that transcended attachments to state or locality," he says (p. 47). One key to their loyalty was the soldiers' "profound bond with Lee" (p. 49), which was best illustrated by James Longstreet's corps upon its return to Virginia, and which contrasts strongly with the negative pull of such political leaders as Georgia governor Joseph Brown, Confederate vice president Alexander Stephens, and North Carolina's William W. Holden. Other "vital

ingredients” of high army morale were the religious revival of that spring and a strong belief in the justness of the rebel cause.

Although Gallagher analyzes a variety of sources in this informative essay, he tends only to set the stage for a more thorough analysis, employs too few sources to present the negative case, and touches only briefly on Lee’s perceptions prior to the historic battle.

In his essay, “I Dread the Spring,” John J. Hennessey authoritatively sets the stage for the Army of the Potomac’s march south in May 1864 by thoroughly examining the views of Union officers and soldiers, which stood in sharp contrast to those of the previous year. Reasons for their greater optimism included better food and supplies, acceptance of emancipation, the religious revival, “a strong collective identity necessary to the health of any organization” (p. 78), the emergence of regimental histories, the Gettysburg victory, changes in military leadership, and the restoration of civil government (which quieted the more politically conservative Union generals).

While a minor criticism, the thesis of this well-written analysis could have been strengthened by citing the New York state gubernatorial election of 1862 rather than the election of 1863 to demonstrate the changes in Union soldiers’ attitudes toward the war.

Gordon Rhea, whose book on the Wilderness battle is becoming a classic, examines the “Union Cavalry in the Wilderness” and concludes that “the opening performances of” Philip H. Sheridan and James H. Wilson “proved stumbling and inept” (p. 106). In the narrative style readers expect of him, Rhea condemns Sheridan for failing to screen the Army of the Potomac’s “critical western flank” and for not discovering the approaches of two Confederate corps” (pp. 124, 125). Wilson is blamed not only for not detecting Lee’s position, but for “unwittingly supplying the Confederates critical information about Grant’s location and intentions” (p. 116). Overall, Rhea concludes, the two “premier” Union cavalry officers in their first outing in the Eastern Theater showed “uninspired leadership,” although George G. Meade also comes in for criticism for giving in to Sheridan’s persistent petitions to conduct a cavalry war rather than concentrating the cavalry toward Lee. Rhea’s essay lives up to its promise, although it tends to bash Sheridan, and it may overstate the role of the cavalry in the battle.

In “Escaping the Shadow of Gettysburg,” Peter S. Carmichael acknowledges that Confederate corps com-

manders Richard Ewell and Ambrose Powell Hill were “mediocre lieutenant generals” (p. 155), but he successfully meliorates the persistently negative images of them (courtesy of Henry Heth and John B. Gordon), which fail to recognize the “sound service” the two rendered on May 5 and 6, 1864 (p. 136). Carmichael argues that too much attention has been paid to the personalities and physical characteristics of the corps commanders and too little to Lee’s “questionable decisions and flawed instructions” (p. 136). Ewell’s and Hill’s conduct at the Wilderness is partly attributable to Lee’s slowness to react to the Federal movement toward the Rapidan River and his “unexplainable and inexcusable” failure to assure that Longstreet’s corps was closer to the Wilderness. The essay concludes that Ewell was understandably cautious, given his orders not to get “entangled with the enemy,” and Hill can be excused for refusing to rectify his disordered lines late on May 5. While Carmichael relies heavily on secondary accounts, his treatment is informative and good reading.

Robert K. Krick’s “‘Lee to the Rear,’ the Texans Cried,” shows his authoritative and engaging style as he examines one of the more romantic episodes of the battle, but it could better be titled, “All You Ever Wanted to Know About ‘Lee to the Rear,’ and More.” Sifting through a large amount of conflicting material (the endnotes form nearly a separate essay), Krick describes the actions of Longstreet’s corps, particularly John Bell Hood’s old “Texas Brigade,” and William T. Poague’s guns in this interpretation of Lee’s unusually impulsive actions during the repulse of the Union troops north of the Plank Road on May 6. Unfortunately, as good as Krick is, and as interesting as the episode is, there may not be enough material for this essay, which tends to overlap Carmichael’s effort and to offer too much detail about “Catherine” Tapp’s farm.

Carol Reardon’s flowing narrative, “The Other Grant (Lewis A.),” seems mislabeled. The focus is on the heroic “Vermont Brigade” that Grant formed, and which Reardon credits with saving the day for the Union on May 5. Reardon carefully weaves accounts by these Vermont soldiers to reinterpret the roles of Winfield Scott Hancock’s Second Corps and George W. Getty’s division of the Sixth Corps along the Plank Road, which, in turn, offers some of the best impressions of the intensity of individual fighting on this aptly named Virginia terrain. Relying heavily on the soldiers’ own words, Reardon not only assures these Vermonters of renown, but she brings to the struggle a writing style that personalizes the battle.

“Like a Duck on a June Bug” is the way one Confederate soldier described the results of Longstreet’s flank attack against the Union left, along the Plank Road, near noon on May 6, and which Robert E. L. Krick compares favorably with the more acclaimed movement by Jackson a year earlier at Chancellorsville. “No better illustration of the flank attack can be found in Virginia during the Civil War” (p. 247) than that made by the greatly outnumbered “makeshift Confederate force...(which) inflicted thirty minutes of terror” on Hancock’s corps, the younger Krick claims (p. 257). Importantly, in his thought-provoking essay, Krick concludes that however

successful Longstreet’s attack and however damaging his wound, “only overwhelming defeat could have stalled Grant’s campaign.”

Overall, these essays offer insights and details about aspects of the Wilderness battle that tend to intrigue and enlighten the serious student of the Civil War, and it is to Gallagher’s credit that he fostered this book.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

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

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

Citation: Wayne Mahood. Review of Gallagher, Gary W., ed., *The Wilderness Campaign*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. November, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1488>

Copyright © 1997 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.