

### Burnside's Gamble: Fredericksburg Account 'Summarizes A Familiar Story'

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## Review

### BURNSIDE'S GAMBLE

#### Fredericksburg account 'summarizes a familiar story'

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**Brooks, Victor** *The Fredericksburg Campaign: November - December 1862*. Combined Books, 2000-05-01. ISBN 1580970338

Through most of the Civil War's campaigns in the Virginia Theater, Fredericksburg held a position near center stage. The opposing capital cities of Washington and Richmond lay equidistant on either side; wagon roads converged in town; a major river flowed past; and a railroad crossed the river in downtown Fredericksburg. From May 1862 to May 1864, the contending armies regularly occupied the valley of the Rappahannock River.

Through four days in December 1862, Federals and Confederates waged desperate war - first in the streets of town, then in its outlying house yards and adjacent fields. Perhaps because the battle unfolded so simply, and attacking Northerners were slaughtered with such relative ease, Fredericksburg remains after 138 years the only major Civil War battle in Virginia that never has been the subject of a thorough, scholarly monograph. Victor Brooks's **Fredericksburg Campaign** does nothing whatsoever to fill even a modest corner of that void.

The book is part of a series called Great Campaigns, which does not pretend to break new ground, so it of course cannot be damned for something it does not strive to achieve. The 210 pages of heavily illustrated text include an array of sidebars (several dozen routine words about General E.V. Sumner, for example). Some of the slender budget of prose describes preliminaries and postscripts to the main event. No notes accompany the text. In place of a bibliography the publisher supplies a three-page "Guide for the Interested Reader," which enumerates two dozen books (including novels) and a television series. The "Guide" does not so much as mention the two most serious books about Fredericksburg, those by G.F.R. Henderson (*The Campaign for Fredericksburg*,

1886) and Vorin Whan (*Fiasco at Fredericksburg*, 1961).

If readers will accept the goal of a *Reader's Digest* approach to a major battle, the author does a decent job of summarizing a familiar story. The prose is workmanlike, unveiling the tale of Federal disaster without any attempt at new information. The superficial rehash inevitably produces casual errors. The "snowy fields" of page 217 actually were bare, under an Indian summer day of nearly 60 degrees of warmth. The night after the battle provided ample misery for everyone, but the frozen corpses in a frozen landscape described on pages 190-91 do not fit with the actual low temperature of forty degrees.

The maps also introduce distressing mistakes. To name a few: Massaponax Creek is misrepresented on page 104; *Stafford* and *Humphreys* and *Featherston* are misspelled on page 146; and the crucial gap in the Confederate line above Hamilton's Crossing is shown as three times too wide on page 126.

**The Fredericksburg Campaign** offers no new information, no new sources, no new insights. It joins several previously published overviews of the great battle. Students wanting something more will have the chance soon to buy major monographs from two authors, George Rable and Frank O'Reilly, who have used manuscripts exhaustively and will produce truly important work on Fredericksburg, from somewhat different perspectives.

*Robert K. Krick, the author of a dozen Civil War books, has lived on the battlefields around Fredericksburg for 30 years.*