

### Bright Starry Banner: A Novel of the Civil War

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## Review

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**Summer 2004**

**Carter, Alden R.** *Bright Starry Banner: A Novel of the Civil War*. Soho Press, Inc., \$27.00 ISBN 1569473552

Way out west

Battle of Stone's River retold

Civil War history and fiction are rarely combined with any success. Alden R. Carter, attempts to venture where few have triumphed in **Bright and Starry Banner** and meets the same fate as countless other authors. Set in the shadows of the Stones River Campaign, Carter takes the reader into the minds of the Union and Confederate leaders who fought for victory in the west. Carter's principle character is Lieutenant Colonel Julius Garesche, the 41 year old chief of staff of the Union Army of the Cumberland, who begins the story with reluctant hopes as he begins service on the staff of Major General William S. Rosecrans, the army's newly appointed leader. Gradually we follow Garesche as he bears witness to a seesaw battle that develops into a stalemate, and with it, the continuing struggle.

The Battle of Stones River, was fought around the Widow Smith House in Murfreesboro Tennessee from December 31, 1862 to January 2, 1863. With his appointment as Commander of the Army of the Cumberland in November 1862, Rosecrans took a page out of General Burnside's book of unsuccessful battle strategies. He spent two months training his army before marching it upon Murfreesboro Tennessee on December 26, where General Braxton Bragg's Confederate Army of the Tennessee had been encamped for a month. Both Armies stood toe to toe, strengthened their respective right flanks, and planed to move with their left. Victory favored the army that moved first. The Confederates made the first move at dawn on December 31st when Confederate General William Hardee hit the Union troops as they were cooking breakfast. Union troops put up a stiff defense until they were forced to retire around 11:00 a.m. when ammunition ran low and supplies were cut off. While Phil Sheridan's

cavalry and George Henry Thomas's infantry fought well, momentum could never be fully recaptured. The battle was fought to a standstill after a final charge by John C. Breckenridge was halted in an open field east of the river on January 2nd. Bragg reluctantly withdrew to winter quarters some 36 miles away. Rosecrans took Murfreesboro for the winter. The three day battle resulted in almost 25,000 Union and Southern casualties.

**Bright and Starry Banner** suffers for lack of interesting characters and writing. Missing are those leaders we often think and wonder about. Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, U.S. Grant are off fighting somewhere else. Present are Garesche, Bragg, and Rosecrans, all of whom suffer from real life mediocrity. None of them ever exhibited brilliant tactical strategy. All could easily be replaced in life. Without success or the fame from the battles of the East, these characters fail to grasp our attention or interest before the book is even opened. This combined with a western theatre battle, which normally has been overshadowed by the East, create a hurdle too high for this author to jump. The writing, itself, is mostly flat, without spark or interest.

Carter's organization of the book is good. Each chapter begins with a summary of the events surrounding the scene. The research is factually sound with little poetic license or grand failing what if scenario. While the characters are portrayed fairly well, they cannot escape the fact that they contributed little in the overall scheme of the war and thus do not capture our interest now. The Battle of Stones River is an important one, but its regional obscurity will attract few to this particular book. Assuming that you want to take the chance, consider the price, \$27.00 for a soft cover book.

Civil War history and fiction rarely mix successfully. Those interested in fiction will likely stick to those books with characters they know and are interested in. Those interested in Civil War history will likely shy away from fiction. Fact is usually much more interesting, and fictional writers can't improve on it.

*John Benson is a Deputy District Attorney, Adjunct Professor of Law, and President of the Bucks County Civil War Roundtable. He often speaks to groups on the causes of the Civil War and conducts High School Tours of the Battle of Gettysburg. He lives with his wife and son in Bucks County Pennsylvania where he is beginning a book on General Winfield Scott Hancock.*