

Nashville: The Western Confederacy's Final Gamble

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Review

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McDonough, James Lee *Nashville: The Western Confederacy's Final Gamble*.
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Confederate army had long odds

Could Hood's gamble have paid off?

Nashville: The Western Confederacy's Final Gamble serves as the capstone of James Lee McDonough's chronicles dealing with Tennessee's major Civil War battles. McDonough, a Nashville native and Civil War scholar, has previously penned studies of Shiloh, Stones River, Chattanooga, and co-authored *Five Tragic Hours: The Battle of Franklin* (1983) with noted Confederate Army of Tennessee historian, Thomas Connolly. **Nashville** marks McDonough's second foray into Confederate General John Bell Hood's 1864 ruinous campaign and seeks to correct what he believes is a historical misconception. Earlier historians have focused upon Franklin as the climax of Hood's campaign and perceived the subsequent Battle of Nashville as merely the Army of Tennessee's desperate last stand. McDonough, however, argues that the Confederates, despite a compromised campaign strategy, the lack of proper logistical support, deteriorating morale, internal staff dissention, and their losses at Franklin believed they could take the Federal garrison at Nashville and thus turn the war's tide. Furthermore, he contends that the Federals' overconfidence and the unchecked ambition of several senior commanders nearly squandered their advantage and narrowly escaped disaster.

McDonough infuses this tale with his characteristic emotionally-charged first-hand accounts and colorful personality profiles. For example, his description of the continuing Confederate misfortunes stemming from the escape of Major General John Schofield's Union force at Spring Hill highlights rebel commanders' private and professional passions. He thoroughly traces the turmoil created by the tragic 1863 death of cavalry leader Earl Van Dorn at the hand of a jealous Spring Hill husband, Dr. George Peters. The rift created by the incident

festered between the couple. As a result of her husband's absence, Jessie McKissack Peters, reportedly continued to work her charms upon the returning Confederate officers in 1864, creating some degree of turmoil in the rebel leadership. Mrs. Peters's alleged intrigues, whiskey's probable role in the Spring Hill debacle, lack of command initiative, and Hood's suspected use of narcotics to alleviate his painful war wounds all seemed to factor into the fog of war that confounded the Confederates at Spring Hill. Whatever the causes of their failure, the results were clear. Hood's best chance to destroy the Union opposition in Middle Tennessee piecemeal literally slipped through his grasp in the middle of the night.

A blindly-enraged Hood blamed his subordinates for this lost opportunity, and he threw his forces headlong into the well-defended Union positions at Franklin to atone for their failures. McDonough recounts these infamous, tragic hours and explains on page 137 why, despite his heavy losses, Hood refused to admit he had been defeated and continued his march on Nashville. The maimed Confederate leader still believed he had a plausible plan for victory and had determined that the troops would be better satisfied, even after defeat if, . . . a brave and vigorous effort was made to save the country. In discussing Hood's rationale for proceeding toward Nashville, McDonough refocuses attention on Lieutenant General Nathan Bedford Forrest's Battle of the Cedars near Murfreesboro. By dispatching Forrest to Murfreesboro, Hood sought to cut off Thomas from receiving reinforcements and to embarrass the Federals by gaining the capture of convalescing and inexperienced Union garrison troops manning the extensive logistical base, Fortress Rosecrans. Hood also hoped that a move against Murfreesboro would compel Major General George Thomas to take the initiative, send out a rescue expedition, and give the Confederates better odds against a split force. A spirited Federal defense at the Battle of the Cedars sent Forrest reeling in retreat. This stinging defeat deprived Hood of his intended results, for Thomas failed to take the bait, and more importantly, left the Army of Tennessee without Forrest's sorely-needed cavalry veterans during the ensuing conflict to the north.

On the Federal side, petty jealousies and aspirations for martial glory among the officers nearly spelled ruin for the Nashville garrison. According to McDonough, Confederate President Jefferson Davis had publicly outlined Hood's campaign strategy in an effort to induce Major General William T. Sherman to move Union forces north out of Georgia. The Federals obliged and rushed to ready the Cumberland River defenses around Nashville to counter the

threat. Animosity between Thomas and Schofield jeopardized the Union advantage by threatening to divide the army's loyalties during the operation. In the days prior to the battle, Schofield incessantly lobbied Grant to axe Thomas because of the Rock of Chickamauga's hesitation to attack. McDonough, who has also written a biography of Schofield, concluded that Thomas's rationale for a delay was entirely sound based upon the bad winter weather and the slight level of offensive threat posed by Hood's army. Regardless, Schofield's criticisms greatly alarmed General Ulysses S. Grant. Frantic, Grant determined to relieve Thomas, but had to recall his messenger carrying this order after news of Thomas's victory arrived. Even after the victory, the bitter feud between the two commanders persisted.

Elsewhere on the field, a few ambitious regimental officers, spurred forward by their successes on the first day, made poor decisions that cost many lives on the second. The strong Confederate secondary fortifications on Peach Orchard Hill mowed down the advancing blue lines, casting the attackers into confusion and panic. Yet, in this carnage on the Union left flank, McDonough credits the valor and sacrifice United States Colored Troops' valor here with finally convincing many northerners that freedmen could fight, including the previously doubting Thomas. This failed Union assault nevertheless forced Hood (perhaps unnecessarily) to draw reinforcements from Shy's Hill on the Confederate left. As the Federals retreated from Peach Orchard Hill, an onslaught of Union blue descended upon the weakened Shy's Hill position. With their left crumbling, many Confederates realized that their cause was lost, and entire units fled in disorder or surrendered. The Army of Tennessee effectively evaporated. Hood's gamble was lost, and along with it, went the hopes of the western Confederacy.

McDonough's **Nashville** succeeds in restoring the role of the oft-neglected United States Colored Troops during the campaign and in revising portions of the battle's chronology. Recently published primary sources form the book's scholarly foundation, but McDonough has incorporated several new primary sources. He provides a good summary of the historiographical debates surrounding the campaign's more controversial aspects. McDonough's own expert opinion and analysis are unfortunately sometimes lost in such discussions. Furthermore, the personality and emotion that distinguish McDonough's earlier style becomes less noticeable in the later chapters, settling down instead to a more traditional fife and drum military history. A tendency to interject vignettes describing the present-day condition of battlefields also frequently distracts the narrative. These discussions would have been better left to a closing chapter on

the continuing battles to preserve and remember the Civil War sites in Middle Tennessee. The efforts to reconstruct Fort Negley (in progress at the time of the book's publication and recently completed) or the failure to protect Franklin as a national battlefield would have meshed well with the eloquent history of Nashville's monument commemorating the battle that appears at the book's end. Another exasperating feature is the lack of good battle maps. In particular, the Battle of Nashville maps do little to improve comprehension of the battle's progress. Many times the maps appear much later than they would have been useful in the narrative. Inexplicably, two maps are duplicated in the text, one on page 161 and 219, and another on 162 and 221.

Overall, **Nashville** is a solid and welcome addition to the McDonough series dealing with the typically overshadowed western theater campaigns, and one that the scholarly community and the general public can both enjoy.

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