

Terrible Swift Sword: The Life of General Philip H. Sheridan

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Review

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Wheelan, Joseph H. *Terrible Swift Sword: The Life of General Philip H. Sheridan*. Da Capo Press, \$26.00 ISBN 978-0-306-82027-4

New Biography of Prominent Union Leader

Joseph Wheelan's *Terrible Swift Sword* was a disappointing biography of General Philip Sheridan. Wheelan is a former journalist who has written histories of Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams and the U.S. /Mexican War. The danger for the non-specialist, without a deep background knowledge of the major events of the era and a tight research focus, is a book that has glaring errors. For example, Wheelan's portrayal of Grant's Overland Campaign shows a serious misunderstanding of the war in Virginia. Grant's strategy is described as simple bloody attrition. Moreover, Wheelan's portrayal of the Indian Wars of the 1860's and 70's and Reconstruction politics is simplistic at best.

Terrible Swift Sword offers a very unbalanced view of Sheridan's life. Although it is expected that his Civil War service should dominate a biography of Sheridan, other aspects of his life and career are barely covered. As General of the Army, Sheridan made significant reforms that helped shaped the modern army. Sheridan was instrumental in creating post-West Point education for officers and helped lay the groundwork for the army's modern staff system. This is given very little attention by Wheelan who otherwise seems unfocused in his analysis of the general. The coverage of the Plains Indian Wars, for example, is given the most attention in the book, second only to the Civil War. Consequently, there were several times in reading that section that I had to remind myself that I was reading a biography of Sheridan and not George Armstrong Custer.

On the personal life of Phil Sheridan there is next to nothing. We are told that Sheridan marries later in life. We are told that he has three children with his young bride but there is not the type of personal information that one expects in

a biography.

Wheelan's research is by no means impressive. It is obvious that Sheridan's own memoirs were the main source and Wheelan rarely adds much to the narrative. As any trained historian knows, personal memoirs should never be trusted in exclusion of other sources. He rarely if ever challenges Sheridan's view of events. In describing the 1868 Washita River Massacre, Wheelan agrees with the portrayal of events in Sheridan's memoirs that the attack on Black Kettle's camp was justified because Chief Black Kettle was responsible for numerous attacks on settlers. The vast majority of historians of the Plains Indian Wars argue the exact opposite. When Wheelan describes the Shenandoah Valley campaign it is obvious that he relied almost solely on Sheridan's memoirs, the published memoirs of Confederate General John Brown Gordon and Jeffrey Wert's *From Winchester to Cedar Creek*. While these are very good sources, a professional historian has to go beyond memoirs and a secondary source if he is going to produce anything which adds to the field.

On a positive note, Wheelan's narrative of the Shenandoah campaign is very well written and his portrayal of Sheridan as a great general whose mere presence on the battlefield could bring victory is very compelling. Wheelan should also be commended for the chapter on reconstruction. He shows the violence and brutality that freedmen and Unionists faced that is often overlooked or downplayed in popular works. Yet unfortunately *Terrible Swift Sword* offers nothing new to Civil War historiography. Wheelan has only synthesized works currently in publication adding countless mistakes of his own. Even the title has been used so much as to border on becoming a cliché. The reader would be much better served to read Sheridan's own *Personal Memoirs*, Wert's *From Winchester to Cedar Creek* or Paul Hutton's masterful examination of Sheridan and the Indian Wars, *Phil Sheridan and his Army*.

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