

Confederate General William Dorsey Pender

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Recommended Citation

Nester, Thomas G. (2014) "Confederate General William Dorsey Pender," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.16.1.11

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol16/iss1/10>

Review

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Winter 2014

Wills, Brian Steel *Confederate General William Dorsey Pender*. Louisiana State University Press, \$39.95 ISBN 9780807152997

New Biography of an Important Division Commander

Brian Steel Wills is professor of history and director of the Center for the Study of the Civil War Era at Kennesaw State University in Georgia. This is his third biography of a prominent, albeit second-tier, Civil War figure, with earlier books published on Confederate cavalryman Nathan Bedford Forrest and Union general George Thomas. He offers this insightful new biography of one of the Confederacy's best known division commanders and youngest major general, William Dorsey Pender, as part of Louisiana State University's series, *Conflicting Worlds: New Dimensions of the American Civil War*. This series is devoted to broadening our understanding of the sectional conflict by exploring new topics and applying new methodologies to the American Civil War. Although Pender is not a new or previously unknown figure, Wills's treatment fits this series' stated mission well by exploring the highly successful Confederate commander's personal Civil War journey as revealed through his personal correspondence with his wife Fanny Shepperd.

This is useful biography that will be of interest to Civil War scholars and enthusiasts alike. But I believe that this book's true value lies within its use as a teaching text for both upper-division undergraduate courses and graduate seminars. Pender is a complex, conflicted, and highly contradictory historical actor who is sure to generate mixed opinions and stimulate discussion. It is Pender's dichotomous nature, as revealed in his letters to his wife, that has made him an attractive subject for the author and should resonate with readers. He could be a courageous, inspiring leader on the battlefield and a martinet in camp; alternately affectionate and hurtful as a husband, often within the same letter; and pompous and self-absorbed but also tender and occasionally thoughtful towards his wife, who acted as his confidant and to whom he frequently revealed

the self-doubt and anxiety that lay beneath his confident exterior. Although most of the letters Fanny wrote to her husband are missing, what evidence exists reveals a devoted and supportive spouse who refused to tolerate her husband's occasional abuses and gave as well as she got. Through this dynamic relationship, Wills reveals the Civil War's hidden costs to a young family. Never a man to shirk his duties, Pender struggled to reconcile his desire to serve his country and satisfy his ambition with his role as a young husband and father. A competent and courageous officer, Pender quickly rose through the ranks in the Army of Northern Virginia "through merit and determination," ultimately becoming the South's youngest major general. (3) His courage, fueled by ambition, came at a price that ultimately had to be paid by his young wife and children, who were left without a husband or father in 1863. Several times wounded in battle, Pender claimed to agonize over the sacrifices his family bore. Although he proposed to keep Fanny ignorant of his battlefield exploits he frequently recounted them to her in excruciating detail even though he claimed to know that it would distress her. Were these the self-serving justifications of a braggart, or could this have been evidence of the impact of battlefield stress that the young officer had to find some way to release? This is one example of the useful discussions this book could provoke and as much recent Civil War scholarship has revealed, the battlefield and the home front were intricately intertwined during this conflict.

Although disparate individual experiences tend to work against the historian's efforts to produce an overarching narrative, Wills touches on several important themes of interest to Civil War scholars. On the issue of the Civil War's causes, the author observes that Pender's "prewar letters contained no angry diatribes against the rising Republican Party, the abolitionists, or anyone else involved in the growing sectional rift." (49) The son of a prosperous North Carolina planter who himself owned or employed slaves as personal servants, Wills concludes that "slavery was more practical than political" for young Pender. (177) He never questioned the institution's morality nor the popular presumption of racial inferiority and yet, during the 1862-63 winter encampment in northern Virginia, Pender not only read Harriet Beecher Stowe's best-selling abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* but declared himself in sympathy with the author's views. In a remarkable letter to his wife he claimed, without any hint of irony, to agree with Stowe since he had struggled to whip his slave, Joe, for a minor infraction. Although there is no way to know for sure, Wills speculates that Pender cared more for southern independence than for the protection of

slavery. His own actions during the secession crisis seem to support this conclusion. Rather than wait for his home state to act, Pender resigned his U.S. Army commission on March 9, 1861, over two months before North Carolina seceded from the Union, because President Abraham Lincoln had strongly opposed the act of secession in his inaugural address. Wills concludes that Pender most likely severed his ties to the Union to protect southern rights, not slavery.

As a military historian, I found Pender's determination to study tactical manuals at the war's outset to be surprising. Although West Point-educated and a veteran of the Old Army, Pender recognized that his education and experience would not suffice for the type of war about to be waged. Also surprising, Pender claimed to have welcomed conscripts into his ranks. Confident in his ability to turn them into good soldiers, as he had the volunteers, he was thankful to have the reinforcements and made no mention of expecting them to be of an inferior quality even though they did not enlist of their own accord. Pender's attitude suggests that historians might want to reconsider the reception of conscripts into the Confederate armies and determine why differences of opinion arose.

In spite of this book's notable achievements, a few shortcomings are worthy of note. In his efforts to present the private man, Wills offers little explanation of the battles Pender experienced. Although these have been covered in great detail elsewhere, the major battles, an important aspect of Pender's military experience and consequently of his wife's experience of the war, require more than the cursory treatment that Wills offers. His descriptions are scant to the point of causing confusion. In addition, with so much excellent work on Civil War memory now available, the author probably should have provided a chapter devoted to Pender's memory and postwar efforts to memorialize the North Carolinian. This is an important aspect of his legacy that is left untouched. Finally, a greater effort to reveal exactly what Fanny experienced on the home front is required. Recognizing that sources are limited, some theoretical approaches might have been applied to give her a greater voice in this narrative. In the end, this is still very much a biography of a prominent Confederate general, which is an exceedingly traditional way to present the Civil War.

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