

The Last Battle of Winchester: Phil Sheridan, Jubal Early, and the Shenandoah Valley Campaign, August 7-September 19, 1864

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Review

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Patchan, Scott C. *The Last Battle of Winchester: Phil Sheridan, Jubal Early, and the Shenandoah Valley Campaign, August 7-September 19, 1864.* Savas Beatie, \$34.95 ISBN 978-1-932714-98-2

A New Look at an Important Battle in the Valley

The 1864 Shenandoah Valley Campaign has never quite received the respect it deserves. An undeniably consequential series of events, the campaign and its numerous engagements have nonetheless failed to attract the level of scholarly interest their importance should demand. Not until Jeffry Wert's 1987 study, *From Winchester to Cedar Creek*, did the campaign garner proper attention. Since the early 2000s a new interest in General Philip Sheridan, thanks to the writing of Eric Wittenberg and others, and the renewed attention of popular historian Gary W. Gallagher, the pivotal roles that Sheridan and his victories in the valley played in the ultimate success of the Federal armies are finally being recognized. Scott C. Patchan's marvelous *The Last Battle of Winchester: Phil Sheridan, Jubal Early, and the Shenandoah Valley Campaign, August 7-September 19, 1864* stands as a bold testimony to this new reality.

Patchan, a self-proclaimed lifelong military history buff, is the author of three previous books on the Civil War in Virginia, including 2007's *Shenandoah Summer: The 1864 Valley Campaign*. He serves on the board of directors of the Kernstown Battlefield Association and is a member of the Shenandoah Valley Battlefield Foundation's Resource Protection Committee. Indeed, his intimate knowledge of the region is on full display in the present volume.

The Third Battle of Winchester or the Battle of Opequan (as the Federals called it) was a great and terrible slugfest that contained all of the elements associated with the epic contests of the Civil War, and then some. Many of the soldiers engaged that day, veterans of Antietam and Gettysburg, considered it the fiercest fight of the war. The outnumbered Confederates of Lieutenant General Jubal Early's small but veteran army fought tenaciously, repeatedly adjusting to

meet each Yankee thrust until a final Federal onslaught, featuring a full-on five-brigade cavalry charge, drove the Rebels from the field in complete rout. It was the largest and deadliest battle of the campaign; it made a national hero of General Sheridan, and likely ensured President Abraham Lincoln's reelection. Among the Confederate casualties was gifted division commander Robert Rodes; the Union lost the equally gifted D. A. Russell among others.

Yet, for all its drama and destruction and its undeniable strategic importance, Third Winchester is not even the most recognized battle from the campaign; that distinction belongs to the stirring seesaw affair at Cedar Creek that occurred a month later. Nor had Winchester attracted the full-blown examination that many, often less significant, engagements have received. Patchan's impressive effort rectifies this, providing what must be considered the definitive work on the battle.

Relying on years of extensive primary research, Patchan presents a remarkably comprehensive, balanced, and thoughtful study that includes Sheridan's measured approach to the battle, and the weeks of jockeying it produced, before unfolding a gripping narrative of the battle itself. Among the many attributes in this book is the attention Patchan pays to the unheralded regimental and brigade commanders, such as Union Colonel Oliver Edwards and Confederate Brigadier General Gabriel Wharton. Of course, the more recognizable characters—flamboyant Federal cavalryman G. A. Custer and Confederate citizen-soldier John B. Gordon—figure prominently as well. Patchan's treatment of Jubal Early is fair, even sympathetic, while his portrayal of Sheridan is generous and more nuanced than many readers might expect, giving him high marks for patience and planning and battlefield leadership while largely refuting the enduring depiction of a reckless and wonton warrior who won by sheer numbers alone.

Patchan's narrative is supported by abundant, well rendered maps and dozens of photographs. His extensive primary research is apparent in his skillful use of participant quotes. Most rewardingly, he provides footnotes rather than endnotes, which scholars of the subject will appreciate. Appendices include Union and Confederate orders of battle, strength and casualty reports, Medals of Honor awarded during the campaign, and select soldier accounts of the campaign, followed by a bibliography comprehensive on primary materials and refreshingly selective on secondary sources.

With thousands of Civil War campaign studies in print, it must often seem that every battle has been covered, thoroughly, and indeed many have been, but with regard to Third Winchester this clearly was not the case until now. Patchan delivers the definitive account that demonstrates why this savage engagement in the Shenandoah deserves to be considered among the great battles of the Civil War.

David Coffey, Ph.D. is professor of history and chair of the Department of History and Philosophy at the University of Tennessee at Martin. He has written the books on the Civil War era, including Sheridan's Lieutenants: Phil Sheridan, His Generals, and the Final Year of the Civil War. Most recently he served as assistant editor for the new 6-volume American Civil War: The Definitive Encyclopedia and Document Collection, Spencer C. Tucker, editor.