

Three Days in the Shenandoah: Stonewall Jackson at Front Royal and Winchester

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Review

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Ecelbarger, Gary *Three Days in the Shenandoah: Stonewall Jackson at Front Royal and Winchester*. University of Oklahoma Press, \$21.95

Shedding the Veneer of the Invincible "Stonewall" Jackson

One of the most polarizing and beloved figures of the American Civil War, Major General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson represents a paradox of brutality and brilliance. With fifteen decades of hindsight, modern scholars and lay historians alike are still dazzled by his legendary martial supremacy. Though Jackson's obstinacy and coolness under fire at the First Battle of Bull Run gave birth to this legend, it was his stunning victory in the 1862 Shenandoah Valley Campaign that marked his emergence as a figure of seemingly unassailable military brilliance and pugnaciousness. Most modern scholarship surrounding this understudied campaign still reflects the veneration and deep admiration with which most historians write about Jackson's crushing defeat of Union Major General Nathaniel P. Banks' Department of the Shenandoah in May 1862. Gary Ecelbarger's *Three Days in the Shenandoah: Stonewall Jackson at Front Royal and Winchester* represents a vast departure from this modus operandi by offering a fresh and new interpretation of Jackson and Banks' decisions during the battles of Front Royal and Winchester from May 23-25, 1862.

In the spring of 1862, the Confederate States of America seemed to be on the brink of annihilation. From the southeast, Union General George B. McClellan's Army of the Potomac had launched the Peninsula Campaign, marching inexorably towards the Confederate capital at Richmond. To the north, a Union corps under the command of Major General Irvin McDowell was marching south to attack Richmond and Union forces under the command of Major General Nathaniel P. Banks controlled the vital Shenandoah Valley at Front Royal and Strasburg. On May 23rd, after receiving approval from General Robert E. Lee to launch an offensive operation against Banks, Jackson's forces attacked the Union garrison at Front Royal. Over the next three days, Federal

forces in the Valley were pummeled and forces to retreat across the Potomac—a stunning victory which “had the greatest impact on Union and Confederate strategy both in and outside the Valley” (xv). In sheer panic, President Abraham Lincoln diverted McDowell’s corps from its march toward Richmond to reinforce Banks in the Shenandoah, an act which Ecelbarger characterizes as an “overreaction” and for which he excoriates the Commander in Chief.

Lincoln’s decisions are not the only ones to receive criticism in *Three Days in the Shenandoah*. Whereas Jackson has traditionally received unabashed praise for his performance in the Valley, Ecelbarger maintains that Jackson was in fact a flawed commander who suffered from unrealistic expectations for his men and who committed operational and tactical blunders by concentrating on single approaches, committing forces to battle piecemeal, and by underutilizing his artillery. Though Jackson’s tenaciousness helped to carry the day, it was also Banks’ unwillingness to send cavalry to cover the mouth of the Luray Valley in the days leading up to the battle of Front Royal as well as his poor deployment of troops at Winchester that largely contributed to Confederate success. However, Ecelbarger also breaks from the historiographical norm by praising Banks for holding together his vastly outnumbered army as well as providing solid leadership during the Union retreat from Strasburg. Ultimately, both generals made right decisions as well as fatal errors that could have pitched the battle in either direction. This is a picture far more nuanced than the traditional depiction of Jackson’s tenacity and brilliance overwhelming the under-prepared Banks.

At less than 300 pages including notes, Ecelbarger manages to keep his book from becoming another bloated battle narrative of yore. His prose is both engaging and succinct, making the campaign narrative almost effortless to follow. Furthermore, his analysis is both erudite and well-supported by a bevy of previously untouched primary source materials which help to breathe new life into what would otherwise be a stale and overwrought subject. The one major flaw of this work, as with almost all battle narratives these days, is the insufficient number of maps with which to help the reader visualize the various maneuvers of battle. Ultimately however, *Three Days in the Shenandoah* provides a powerful and well-researched understanding of a complex battle and an even more complex man.

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