

Battle of Stones River: The Forgotten Conflict Between the Confederate Army of Tennessee and the Union Army of the Cumberland

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Review

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Daniel, Larry *Battle of Stones River: The Forgotten Conflict between the Confederate Army of Tennessee and the Union Army of the Cumberland.* Louisiana State University Press, \$38.50 ISBN 978-0-8071-4516-6

A Review of an Important, but Understudied, Battle

In a letter written in early January 1863, less than a week after the Battle of Stones River, Confederate Brigadier General Patton Anderson bitterly told his wife that he doubted that anyone would “ever write a truthful history of the war” (127). Anderson was incensed that other regiments had stolen credit from his men for capturing an enemy artillery battery during the first few hours of fighting; however, his remarks could apply to numerous other minor and major points from the battle as Union and Confederate leaders tried to gain recognition, deflect blame, and make sense of the slaughter. The cost for each side had been shockingly high: about one-third of each army was lost, with total casualties approaching 25,000 men. After the first day of fighting on December 31, Confederate General Braxton Bragg claimed to have won a major victory, but a few days later he withdrew from Murfreesboro, leaving the field to William Rosecrans’s Army of the Cumberland. Although the battle resulted in minimal gain of territory, Abraham Lincoln wrote to Rosecrans, “you gave us a hard-earned victory, which, had there been a defeat instead, the nation could scarcely have lived over” (211). But if the meanings of this brutal clash were contested at the time, today Americans have largely forgotten the battle—a shopping mall and multi-story hotel currently occupy some of the most significant positions of the field.

Larry Daniel’s meticulously researched and skillfully written new book is the best study to date of this sometimes misunderstood or overlooked battle. Over the last several decades, Daniel has enhanced our understanding of the Civil War in the West with books on command in the Union Army of the Cumberland, soldiering in the Confederate Army of Tennessee, the struggle over

Island No. 10, and the Battle of Shiloh. Now he aims to restore the fighting at Stones River to "its proper place in the war" (xi). Following Confederate disappointment in the Perryville campaign and Union setbacks at Fredericksburg in Virginia and Vicksburg in Mississippi, the collision in Middle Tennessee appeared to be a "must win" for both sides. Neither accomplished the decisive destruction of the other, but the staggering casualty rates proved this "was not from a lack of trying" (xii).

The study is organized chronologically with the first third of the book outlining the period from October 1862 to the eve of the battle and the remainder a detailed treatment of the battle itself. Along the way, Daniel methodically assesses the claims of participants and later scholars on a host of issues great and small. Bragg's use of cavalry, his decision to divide his army between the opposite banks of Stones River, and Rosecrans's councils with his generals all receive thorough treatment, and Daniel devotes a separate appendix analyzing Jefferson Davis's decision to transfer Carter Stevenson's division away from Bragg's army. The book is also notable for its inclusion of perspectives from much further down the chain of command. Daniel supplements previous scholarship by adding untapped letters, diaries, and small-town newspapers. Fifteen photographs and illustrations, thirteen detailed maps, and an appendix listing the corps, division, and brigade composition of the opposing forces at the battle complement the text's detailed descriptions of troop movements and positions.

Daniel hauntingly depicts the courage, chaos, and carnage that characterized the battle, vividly conveying the horror of (in the words of one survivor) the "headless, armless, legless men, dead men torn to pieces by shells, wounded men lacerated beyond description" (196). Other harsh realities of Civil War soldiering receive attention as well. For instance, one "distant casualty" was a Northern lieutenant who suffered a nervous breakdown while under intense shelling. He survived the bombardment, but was wild, incoherent, and suicidal thereafter (121). The men of both sides battled the elements, slogging through snow and mud, wading through icy waist-deep water, and peering anxiously through mist and fog. Union Colonel Nicholas Greusel survived unscathed during the Confederate onslaught and boldly counterattacked with a bayonet charge—but his failing health forced him to leave the army shortly after the battle, apparently a consequence of exposure to the harsh winter weather. Daniel also notes the plight of civilians, including Giles Harding, who, according to a Union officer, seemed to care "more about his chickens than he did either the northerners or

southerners" and hid in his basement as the armies surged back and forth around his home (115).

This reviewer would have liked to see a bit more coverage of the battle's legacy. The book's rather brief final chapter gives some attention to the further deterioration of relations between Bragg and his generals, but devotes only about a page to Northern reaction to the battle. More context may improve the reader's understanding of the battle's place in the war, as well as why it eventually became a "forgotten conflict" for many Americans. But overall, this is an outstanding study full of insights regarding an important battle and the broader nature of the war.

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