

The World's Largest Prison: The Story of Camp Lawton

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Review

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Derden, John K. *The World's Largest Prison: The Story of Camp Lawton.* Mercer University Press, \$35.00 ISBN 978-0-88146-415-3

A Revealing Look at a Civil War Site Still Making News Today

It is somewhat odd—in the midst of looking back at the Civil War during its sesquicentennial—to think that any aspect of the conflict could still be classified as a current event, but that is precisely what Camp Lawton represents. Thanks to the recent archeological work at the former Confederate prison site in Georgia, Camp Lawton has the potential to reveal much about the controversial topic of Civil War prisons. John Derden's timely book serves as the first scholarly monograph dedicated to the location and unearths a story just beginning to get the attention it deserves.

The author has professed interest in Camp Lawton since the 1970s, so it does not surprise that the strength of this work is in his mastery of the prison's details. Although Camp Lawton only functioned as an operational prison site for several weeks in the late fall of 1864, Derden ably traces the story of how the prison came to be and the conditions experienced within its walls. By combining the perspectives of both the Confederates who oversaw Camp Lawton with the accounts generated by Union captives, Derden shows that this briefly used prison merits increased attention. One particularly useful insight comes from how Derden shows that CSA Brigadier General John Winder—the man tasked with organizing the Confederate prison system—planned Camp Lawton to “correct” the failures of Georgia's much more notorious prison, Andersonville (56). This evidence certainly softens the traditional depiction of Winder as callous towards the needs of his Union charges. Although the imminent end of the Confederacy prevented Camp Lawton from being tested with a full capacity of Union inmates, the prison's design does challenge the enduring perception that the Confederacy actively conspired against the lives of those it held captive.

But despite the book's unquestioned value, there are significant flaws. The most serious concern ironically results from the strength of Derden's commanding knowledge about the prison. His singular focus on recreating the timeline of events means that numerous opportunities for interpretative exploration pass without comment. The implication of Camp Lawton's design vis-à-vis Andersonville, which Derden touches on only briefly before moving on, is just one such moment. There is a pattern throughout the text where a deeper effort to engage in the historiographical debates that surround the topic of Civil War prisons—and there are many—would be appropriate. For those interested in Camp Lawton alone, this isolation should not disturb, but readers interested in the more general story of Civil War prisons would appreciate a stronger connection to the broader context. Another oddity relates to Derden's insistence on calling Andersonville by its lesser known name, Camp Sumter. The repeated use of Camp Sumter throughout the book smacks of a gimmick to magnify the importance of Camp Lawton. But the two sites cannot be equated. Andersonville has stood for 150 years as a symbol of the destructive nature of the Civil War, while Camp Lawton's importance lies less in its past, and more in what the excavations there can teach us about the story of Civil War prisons in the present and future.

Derden deserves congratulations for this valuable study of Camp Lawton, but I suspect even he would admit that the discussion about this Civil War site is just beginning.

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