

Fire in the Cane Field: the Federal Invasion of Louisiana and Texas, January 1861-January 1863

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Review

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Frazier, Donald S. *Fire in the Cane Field: The Federal Invasion of Louisiana and Texas, January 1861-January 1863*. State House Press, \$39.95 ISBN 9781933337364

The Civil War Comes to Louisiana

This is the first in a series of four books on the Civil War in Louisiana and parts of Texas that author Donald S. Frazier calls his *Louisiana Quadrille*. As explained in the preface, he coined the term because the maneuverings by opposing armies and navies in the western Gulf coast region reminded him of a spirited dance with ever-changing partners. Although personalities and units on both sides are thoroughly examined, Frazier pays particular attention to the Texans. A professor of history at McMurry University in Abilene, Texas, and author of the award-winning book *Blood and Treasure: Confederate Empire in the Southwest* (Texas A&M; University Press, 1995), Frazier has a natural affinity for the soldiers of the Lone Star State. Subsequent titles in the series are *Thunder across the Swamp: The Fight for the Lower Mississippi, February 1863-May 1863*; *Blood on the Bayou: The Campaigns of Tom Green's Texans, June 1863-February 1864*; and *Death at the Landing: The Contest for the Red River and the Collapse of Confederate Louisiana, March 1864-June 1865*.

This volume begins with Louisiana's secession in January 1861 and concludes with the battle of Galveston, Texas, in January 1863. In between Frazier skillfully covers the mobilization of troops by Louisiana and Texas, the Union capture of New Orleans, and the ebb and flow of battle as Yankees and Rebels fought it out for control of the rich and strategic Lafourche District and lower Bayou Teche.

Military history is the book's main focus. Even readers who are knowledgeable of the Civil War in Louisiana will probably be surprised at the number and ferocity of the small scale clashes that took place along Bayous

Lafourche and Teche as each side tried to exert its authority over the region. Even when the armies remained out of sight, raids and guerrilla activity ravaged large areas and added to the people's misery. One telling story is that of the 8th Vermont, one of the first Union regiments sent out of New Orleans to patrol the railroad in the upper Lafourche District. In less than six months, this unit suffered three hundred casualties in raids and skirmishes.

While military matters are at the center of Frazier's story, he does not ignore economic, political, and social events. Through firsthand accounts, the author reveals the tremendous physical damage inflicted on Louisiana as armies operated back and forth across the landscape, and Union soldiers (and to a lesser degree Confederates) looted and pillaged towns and farms. When thousands of slaves abandoned their plantations and Union authorities began enlisting African Americans into the army, the very fabric of society came unhinged. Union officials struggled in a delicate balancing act to find a way to protect these "contrabands" from Rebel reprisals, yet keep them working on plantations owned by loyal unionists.

One of the book's strong points is the author providing short biographical sketches of the major personalities and analyzing their strengths and weaknesses. Benjamin Butler comes off as a corrupt and rather ruthless officer who put his political skills to good use in occupying New Orleans, but who lacked the military ability to subdue the enemy in the field. After failing in his invasion of New Mexico and being accused of drunkenness, Henry Hopkins Sibley was transferred to Louisiana but performed lackluster service there, as well. Richard Taylor is seen as a skillful commander who learned the art of war under Stonewall Jackson in Virginia, while Alfred Mouton appears rather erratic in his tactical abilities.

Frazier is an excellent writer and uses just the right combination of narrative storytelling, critical analysis, and quotes from letters and diaries. Numerous photographs of both people and places are scattered throughout the book, and excellent maps allow the reader to follow the battlefield maneuvers. The endnotes and bibliography show Frazier dug deeply into unpublished manuscript collections, official records, memoirs, and secondary sources.

As thorough as the book is, one does have to question the author's coverage of some events. David Farragut's weeklong bombardment and subsequent passage of Forts Jackson and St. Philip in a wild nighttime battle with the

Confederate Navy is only mentioned in passing. And the battle of Baton Rouge is dismissed with a single paragraph. Fort Jackson was one of the most important battles of the war in Louisiana because it led to the capture of New Orleans, and the combined casualties at Baton Rouge approached nearly 1,000. On the other hand, small skirmishes and raids receive detailed coverage. For example, an entire chapter is devoted to the small clash at Georgia Landing on Bayou Lafourche.

This somewhat lack of balance, however, is a minor point. *Fire in the Cane Field* is not only an excellent work of history; it is also a joy to read. I look forward to the future volumes in Frazier's *Louisiana Quadrille*.

Terry L. Jones is a professor of history at the University of Louisiana at Monroe. He has published several books on the Civil War, including Lee's Tigers: the Louisiana Infantry in the Army of Northern Virginia (LSU Press, 1987) and The American Civil War (McGraw Hill Higher Education, 2010).