

Civil War Book Review

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Civil War Arkansas 1863: The Battle for a State

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Review

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Christ, Mark *Civil War Arkansas 1863: The Battle for a State*. University of Oklahoma Press, \$34.95 ISBN 978-0-8061-4087-2

A Close Investigation of One State's Experience

Mark Christ, an established expert on Civil War Arkansas and the Community Outreach Director for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, has produced the first book-length study of the battles and campaigns in the state during 1863. This well-researched work has a clear focus: the struggle between Union and Confederate forces to control the strategic Arkansas River Valley. Christ unfolds a tale of Federal domination and nearly unbroken success that resulted in control of the valley by the end of the year. The Battle of Arkansas Post in January opened the area to invasion and took a significant number of Confederate troops out of action. Confederate commander Theophilus H. Holmes attempted to recover with an offensive against Union-held Helena in July, but the failed attack only served to set up the Federal's successful campaign to capture Little Rock. In the meantime, Union successes in Indian Territory helped secure Fort Smith and the western portions of the river valley. The last major gasp of the year for the Confederacy was an October attempt to dislodge Union forces from Pine Bluff. The failure of that campaign ensured that Union control was secure.

Civil War Arkansas 1863 is pure narrative military history with no larger argument or explicit engagement with other scholarship on the Civil War. Each battle is broken down into minute tactical detail. Christ tells his story with heavy reliance on quotes from primary sources, a feature of the writing that creates vivid scenes and gives the reader a good sense of the perspective of the participants. A striking feature of this perspective is the importance of Arkansas's terrain to the men who had to slog across it. Soldiers fought swamps and mud as often as rebels or Yankees. It seems as if Christ has found a written observation for every possible moment of action during the battles and marches

that he describes. Although this is one of the great strengths of the book, at times this use of quotes obscures the big picture and any conclusions of his own that Christ wishes the reader to draw.

A significant portion of the book also covers the war in Indian Territory, as events there are intricately related to the outcomes in Arkansas. Although the focus of the book is the major campaigns and battles, Christ also treats a myriad of themes related to the military history of Arkansas. Particularly notable was how desertion plagued Confederate forces after every defeat and how guerillas and bushwhackers created chaos throughout the state. Christ also offers assessments, often quoting other scholars, of the leadership on both sides and the reasons for Confederate defeat in the various battles. Not surprisingly to those familiar with the Civil War in the West, Confederate forces in Arkansas suffered from incompetent leaders, bickering and even dueling commanders, and inadequate resources.

Readers who wish to understand the military situation in the Trans-Mississippi region would do well to consult this book. Although he does not explicitly offer new interpretations, Christ has provided detail and structure to an important story that has not received adequate attention. Here, in one accessible work, are the key events that lost the Arkansas River Valley to the Confederacy.

Lorien Foote is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Central Arkansas and the author of two books, including The Gentlemen and the Roughs: Manhood, Honor, and Violence in the Union Army.