

Donnybrook: The Battle of Bull Run, 1861

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Review

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Detzer, David *Donnybrook: The Battle of Bull Run, 1861*. Harcourt, Inc, \$28.00
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Shattered Expectations

The Battle for Manassas

With the publication of this book, David Detzer, professor emeritus of history with Connecticut State University, follows his widely acclaimed **Allegiance: Fort Sumter, Charleston and the Beginning of the Civil War** with a marvelous account of the first great battle of the war—Bull Run. Like his previous work, **Donnybrook: The Battle of Bull Run, 1861**, is a highly readable, comprehensive, and thoughtfully written examination of a pivotal moment in our greatest national tragedy.

In the first months of the Civil War, few Americans understood how brutal and deadly the war would become, and few men North or South had any real understanding of what combat would be like. For the principal armies in the East, the first great test came on July 21, 1861, when a Union army, the largest military force organized in American history at the time, led by General Irvin McDowell, slammed into Confederate forces commanded by P.G.T. Beauregard and Joseph E. Johnston near a stream called Bull Run, north of Manassas Junction in Prince William County, VA. The opposing forces, totaling nearly 62,800 men, grappled from early morning until after dark. The eight-hour contest claimed nearly 1,000 men killed and another 3,000 more wounded. America had never witnessed a day like this. The war, as one Virginian stated, was no longer funny.

Donnybrook is the second major history published on First Bull Run in recent years to detail the battle from its origins through its aftermath. It joins **A Single Grand Victory** by Ethan S. Rafuse, as the only significant modern studies of the battle written since William C. Davis penned his splendid **Battle at**

Bull Run nearly twenty-five years ago. In this most recent examination of the Manassas campaign, David Detzer approaches the epic event with great force, insight, and zeal, laying out an excellent contextual narrative, correcting outdated interpretations on the abilities of principle leaders, and through use of hundreds of old letters, journals, memoirs, and military records offers fresh perspectives and revealing vignettes of the battle as experienced by the average soldier and their leaders. The momentous clash at Bull Run marked the first strategic use of railroads, introduced citizens of the Confederacy to the first draft in American history, and tested the emotional motivation of soldiers on both sides to wage war on their countrymen for an uncertain cause. Along with analysis of the military talents of the respective army leaders Johnston, Beauregard, and McDowell, Detzer illustrates the clash north of Manassas Junction ably tested the leadership qualities of numerous subordinate Confederate and Union officers who later came to dominate the historical record of the war: Stonewall Jackson, James Longstreet, Jubal Early, J.E.B. Stuart, Wade Hampton, Ambrose Burnside, Oliver O. Howard, George Sykes, and William T. Sherman.

In the wake of McDowell's defeat at Bull Run, President Abraham Lincoln and his military advisors were forced to reconsider whether initial national enlistments were woefully under strength, while grim-jawed Republicans dominating the Joint Committee of the Conduct of the Present War searched within the ranks for a convenient scapegoat. Detzer offers extraordinary insight into the blame game waged by the Committee, which criticized General Robert Patterson for his failure to keep Joseph Johnston from shifting southern reinforcements from the lower Shenandoah Valley by railroad to Manassas on the eve of battle. Detzer believes the harsh judgment of Patterson was unfair, and dramatically unravels the real reasons for the Union failure at Bull Run — issues he states prove to be far more complicated than the nonexistent timidity of Patterson.

David Detzer has written a compelling analysis of a defining moment in the bitter struggle over sovereignty and slavery in America. **Donnybrook** reveals hard lessons of war learned on the battlefield — brutal realities not anticipated by those who sent their soldiers into harms way.

*Stacy D. Allen, a twenty-year veteran of the National Park Service, currently serves as Chief Park Ranger at Shiloh National Military Park in Tennessee and Mississippi. He has a book coming out in January 2006, entitled, **On the***

Skirmish Line, Behind a Friendly Tree: The Civil War Memoirs of William Royal Oake, 26th Iowa Volunteers. Allen edited the memoir for Farcountry Press of Helena, Montana, authoring an introduction, epilogue, and biographical appendix to accompany the Iowa veteran's original manuscript.