

Fort Bascom: Soldiers, Comancheros, And Indians In The Canadian River Valley

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Review

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Blackshear, James Bailey *Fort Bascom: Soldiers, Comancheros, and Indians in the Canadian River Valley*. University of Oklahoma Press, \$29.95 ISBN 9780806152097

Fort Bascom

Our understanding of the Civil War era's brutal fighting and unfinished reconciliation has long stopped on the eastern edge of the Great Plains. But scholars have lately expanded the *long* Civil War and Reconstruction into the American West and, by doing so, have started to slowly redefine the conflict's geographical and conceptual framework. Scholars like Adam Arenson, Andrew R. Graybill, Megan Kate Nelson, Virginia Scharff, and others have recently shown the rich and textured history of the American West in the Civil War era not only from a regional view but from a national perspective, challenging the eastern-focused paradigm of Civil War studies. In short, historians have moved the Civil War west. James Bailey Blackshear's exhaustively researched and well-narrated *Fort Bascom: Soldiers, Comancheros, and Indians in the Canadian River Valley* is a valuable addition to this growing westward-focused historiography. For Blackshear, Fort Bascom represents something of a lens through which to view and understand the diverse people who lived, fought, traded, and passed through northeastern New Mexico and the Texas Panhandle in the 1860s and 1870s. Blackshear contends that Fort Bascom was not only a critically important military outpost in the region, but that it also played a significant, if short-lived, role in Comanchero, white, and Indian trade networks.

Blackshear's work is the most recent and comprehensive examination of Fort Bascom. It is difficult to imagine a more robust and detailed history of the fort and its place in the Civil War era West. Place biographies like this are valuable, and Blackshear's focus on Fort Bascom provides a central thread with which to tie together and explore in a clear narrative the cultural, military, economic, and environmental history of the region. Further, Blackshear engages

borderlands history in helpful ways by illustrating the complex military and economic relationships between American soldiers, Comancheros, Comanche, Kiowa, Navajos, Puebloans on the border of the Llano Estacado and Comancheria during one of the most tumultuous times in that region's (and American) history.

Union forces and local laborers built Fort Bascom in 1863 in order to guard the major thoroughfares from Arkansas and Texas as well as protect American interests from hostile Indians—namely the Comanche and Kiowa. Located in northeastern New Mexico near present day Tucumcari, Fort Bascom was generally well situated to oversee the vast and harsh region along the western Canadian River Valley and the Llano Estacado—a massive mesa encompassing over 35,000 square miles. And thanks to it being situated on the western edge of the lower Great Plains, the fort became the closest and most prominent Federal redoubt facing Confederate Texas as well as thousands of Kiowa and Comanche Indians.

Perhaps Fort Bascom's most enduring impact occurred after the Civil War ended and the Indian Wars ramped-up in the region, and here is where Blackshear devotes the majority of his study. Blackshear nicely conveys the especially brutal *total* war that raged throughout the region—a style of warfare brought to bear by the likes of Gens. William Tecumseh Sherman and Philip Sheridan. Sherman and Sheridan had practiced elements of this style of fighting during the Civil War, and they employed it with devastating effect against the Native Americans. Just as the nation struggled to reconstruct and reconcile the South following the war, people in the West now suffered a wrenching period of often bloody and always troubled racial, cultural, and political transformation and conquest. Fort Bascom, Blackshear makes clear, was situated at the center of this pointed struggle. As historian Elliott West has shown, the post-war South did not hold a monopoly on race-centered, broken, and bloody agitation for reconciliation—far from it. To be sure, the West as a region had become an unparalleled “ethnic stew” defined by violence, conquest, and ever-shifting boundaries. Using Fort Bascom as a cultural, racial, and ethnic backdrop, Blackshear confirms this remarkable diversity and brutality.

Blackshear also invokes the natural environment's critically important role in shaping the human experience at Fort Bascom. The harsh terrain and arid climate that defines northeast New Mexico and northwest Texas made life at the fort especially difficult for those American soldiers unaccustomed to the region.

Blackshear provides an impressive analysis of the *science* behind the environment—something that environmental historians will find especially gratifying and useful. He also shows in compelling ways how American soldiers dealt with, or succumbed to, the grim environment compared to the better adjusted local New Mexicans, Comancheros, and Indians. Here Blackshear delves into detailed logistics based on careful and thorough research to show how the fort remained operational and productive in the middle of a largely desolate landscape.

Blackshear's book is a fine and much needed contribution to an exciting and critically important movement in Civil War era scholarship, and it is a solid addition to western, environmental, and borderlands historiography. More specifically, Blackshear's study pulls from the shadows a fort and a region that deserves a prominent spot on our geographical and conceptual radar, especially as scholars continue to reevaluate and reinterpret the West's place in the greater Civil War and Reconstruction.

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