

Cwbr Author Interview: The Civil War In The West: Victory And Defeat From The Appalachians To The Mississippi

Earl J. Hess

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Hess, Earl J. (2012) "Cwbr Author Interview: The Civil War In The West: Victory And Defeat From The Appalachians To The Mississippi," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.14.3.04

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol14/iss3/26>

Interview

CWBR AUTHOR INTERVIEW: THE CIVIL WAR IN THE WEST: VICTORY AND DEFEAT FROM THE APPALACHIANS TO THE MISSISSIPPI

Hess, Earl J.

Summer 2012

Interview with Earl J. Hess, the Stewart W. McClelland Chair in history at Lincoln Memorial University

Interviewed by Nathan Buman

[Click here for the review](#)

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Today, Professor Earl J. Hess, the Stewart W. McClelland Chair in History at Lincoln Memorial University, joins me to discuss his most recent work, *The Civil War in the West: Victory and Defeat from the Appalachians to the Mississippi*. Professor Hess, thank you for joining me today.

Earl Hess (EH): You're welcome and good morning. I'm happy to be here.

CWBR: You focus your study on the western armies and the activity in the western theater. What are some of the strengths and limitations of a geographic study of the Civil War?

EH: That's an interesting question. I think some of the strengths are that we have a tendency, maybe, to under-appreciate the strength of regional identity in the 1860s in America. Even though, I think a lot of people are aware of that, but still it is good to understand why we should think about that and have some deep awareness about what were the different characteristics of the regions of the United States and how they conducted the war. I think there were some real differences between the West and the East and that is why, in the book, I often refer to the "western way" of conducting the Civil War on the part of the

Federals. There are four to five themes that could be discussed in that regard. One of them was an almost overwhelming self-confidence that the western Federals developed in their ability to handle their Confederate enemy. That, as many of the readers of Civil War military history know did not exist very well in the East for various reasons. You have Robert E. Lee in the East, of course, and in the West you had different Confederate commanders and you had a lot of Confederate problems in the West versus the Confederate strengths in the East and a lot of Union strengths in the West that countered-balanced all that sort of thing. In terms of limitations, of doing something like this, I guess maybe you can lose a sense of cooperation and I try to compensate for that by pointing out the numerous ways in which the East and the West cooperated with each other, not only the Union side but the Confederate side as well. People know about the 11th and 12th Corps coming to Chattanooga after the Union defeat at Chickamauga in '63 but, you know, the 23rd Corps went to the East and an awful lot of black regiments that were raised in Kentucky in 1862, most of them were shipped to the East and served in the Army of the James which, I think, is kind of interesting and not very well known. There was an awful lot of regional cooperation. Most of the troops down in the Department of the Gulf were northeastern troops instead of western troops. There were very few troops from the western states down there in the New Orleans area.

CWBR: I wonder how is the focus on the western soldier beneficial? Did he have a unique perspective on the war and the way that he looked at the big picture?

EH: I think there is an argument to be made about that. I think the western soldier, because of Shiloh, tended to feel like they were surprised at Shiloh and in April of '62 they came close to losing but they persisted; they fought very hard, they defeated the Confederates in battle, at least in their view. And beginning with that and successive victories after that they developed a really, really striking self-confidence that, I think, historians and readers ought to pay a little more attention to as a major emotional factor in the winning of the war in the West. Western soldiers, as they continued to be successful also were quite aware that their compatriots in the East (I am talking about Union soldiers) were not being successful. They read in the newspapers about defeats at Second Bull Run and then Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville and they tended to be kind of disgusted by that and they felt like their counterparts in blue in Virginia were not pulling their weight in terms of winning the Civil War. And so you can see some very striking commentary in their letters and diaries about that issue. It is not just

the rank and file as Grant and Sherman also paid keen attention to all of that and I think they were getting kind of disgusted by the fact that the eastern Federals were not doing all they could do to keep Lee occupied. I think that the dispatch of Longstreet and two divisions from the Army of Northern Virginia to help win the Confederate victory at Chickamauga was something of a turning point in the mindset of Grant and Sherman, feeling that after they got the situation righted at Chattanooga in November of '63 that something really needed to be done to better coordinate efforts East and West. And when Grant was given a chance to command all Union forces, he really implanted that concept. If there really was a western way of war in the Civil War, I think Grant brought it with him in March of '64 to Virginia and, to a large degree, was successful in planting that concept over the whole Union war effort.

CWBR: You mentioned cooperation between East and West and I wonder what challenges did Union officers in the West have to overcome considering their distance from Washington and how did they get the administration invested in a war so far away when they are so concerned with defending the city itself?

EH: If anything, I think the western commanders were better off because of the distance from Washington because they had less interference from the politicians and I think they had a bit more freedom to develop a war effort as they wanted to in the West. Obviously, they needed financial support; they needed other things too, that were basic to conducting the war effort. It seems like there is a lot less political interference in the Union war effort in the western states than there is in Virginia. And that may well be a factor in helping to develop this successful western way of war as opposed to the (in a degree in a way) the unsuccessful way of conducting the war in the Virginia theater, at least before Grant got there and kind of changed things around a little bit in the spring of '64. I also make the point in the book that I really think that Lincoln, who, of course, was Kentucky-born and lived in Indiana and in Illinois, he was a westerner, through and through. He seems to have paid a lot more attention to the western theater and was pretty keen about doing, I think, the right thing to support there. Jefferson Davis was, of course, also western-born in Kentucky too and he lived in Mississippi in the 1850s and et cetera, but he seemed to have paid less attention, or at least-maybe it is not fair to say he paid less attention-but his handling of western generals was less astute than his handling of Lee. And there is an interesting dichotomy there between Richmond and Washington in terms of how they viewed the West and how they handled-and the success with which they handled-the western forces.

CWBR: You speak a great deal about the ways that occupation challenged the western armies. How did this influence their course of war and what did the occupation period indicate about both Confederate morale and the ability of Reconstruction after the war?

EH: There are some big questions here. It is a developing argument in the literature over the past few years. A lot more interest is being drawn to occupation problems in the Civil War, especially guerrilla activity. I did not have room in my book to get into a really big, detailed discussion of all this but I do not really see guerrilla activity or necessarily civilian problems, in general, as necessarily guiding, in important ways, the general course of the way the North fought the Civil War. That is an arguable point, of course. I really focus in my book on things that were integral to the movement of troops across deep, large, expansive enemy territory. How do you do that? You utilize effectively available technology like steamboats on the river system or railroad equipment where the rivers do not offer you the same opportunity as steamboats. And, obviously, commanders have an awful lot of problems to deal with in terms of dealing with, sometimes troublesome civilians or with civilians who take guns and take to the woods and start taking pot shots at Union soldiers. If you read through the dispatches of Union generals in the West, three-fourths, eighty percent of what they are discussing are issues like this. And maybe only twenty to twenty-five percent of the time they are discussing how to move troops and how to deal with organized Confederate troops on the frontier between Union-controlled territory and Confederate-controlled territory. But at the same time, I do not see any clear links between anger over guerrilla attacks translating itself into a greater desire to burn more territory or burn more resources to punish the South. That effort to try to burn resources, to consume Confederate food yourself, that kind of stuff, all of that is hard war policy and has a half a dozen major origins. It can range all the way from a simple desire by young Union soldiers who are hungry and they are not getting enough food from their commissary so they want more food so they just naturally go out on their own to take food from civilians. That is the most fundamental reason why you have this developing and there are other reasons. There are real limitations to the Union supply system. The Union resources were not inexhaustible and the ability to transport supplies was not unlimited so a lot of times Union soldiers did go hungry because their commissaries could not provide them with, even their regular, rations. It is true that some people did get angry at guerrilla attacks and think that they should burn in retaliation; that, of course, did happen too. But there are many, many different streams of meeting

that hard war policy. I disagree, for example, with Daniel Sutherland argument in his recently-published award-winning book on the guerrilla war in the Civil War that it was a major factor in leading to the hard war policy and in altering the northern war effort. I am not sure that that is a supportable argument. But I think that there were two things going on here; I do not think that they necessarily relate to each other. It is the organization and transportation and fighting of organized forces, won by the Union against the Confederates, but then there is a plethora of problems that commanders had to deal with in terms of occupying the ever-growing area of the South that Union soldiers no controlled. I think that the Union side of the Civil War did a wonderful job winning that first problem and never really came up with truly effective (consistently effective) policies of dealing with the second problem. I think they experimented a lot in dealing with occupation issues. Sometimes it worked, oftentimes it did not. In the end, it was the ending of the organized war that finally brought peace to the occupied areas and finally that is when guerrilla fighting completely evaporated everywhere by 1865.

CWBR: On the flip side to guerrilla warfare, you do mention, on several occasions, where white southerners throughout the war welcome the invading northern troops. What accounts for this and how common was that occurrence during the war?

EH: The North would have liked to believe that there was a huge reservoir of Loyalists in the Confederacy and, of course, in some pockets there were, especially in East Tennessee. That, of course, the biggest example. The overwhelming majority of southerners in the mountainous counties in eastern Tennessee were Loyalist and vigorously Loyalist, willing to die for their beliefs. You have a lot of Loyalists in northern Alabama and western North Carolina, here and there. Even in some of the areas of the South that are overwhelmingly pro-Confederate, you find a few Loyalists here and there. And, you know, the same was true in the American Revolution where you found Loyalists to the Crown, especially in the southern colonies in the 1770s. How do you account for it? I am not sure that historians have answered that question; I do not think that necessarily I have either. I actually live here in East Tennessee and so the idea of mountain Loyalism is very keen here and people know about it and they are interested it. I do not think that any historian has yet really dug deep enough to try to deeply understand why that was so and they have a tendency to just, kind of, say that it was so and look at the effects of it in the 1860s. There are a number of different reasons. There can be some sort of anti-slave attitude and certainly it

is true that the mountain Loyalists detested slavery, not because they were abolitionists but because they hated the fact that the ownership of slaves created an elite caste in southern society and so, to a degree it is a sort of class consciousness going on there. The East Tennessee Loyalists tended to be very racist on top of that but that does not mean that their loyalty to the flag and the hatred of the planter aristocracy was any less. And, to a large degree, the Union troops were keen to seek these people out and utilize them and, of course, as everyone knows, an awful lot of southerners served in blue. Every seceded state contributed troops to the Union army, some of them more than others. And that did weaken the strength of the Confederacy and its ability to opt for independence. I do not know that it necessarily was the fatal weakness but it certainly was one of the many weaknesses to CSA defeat, especially in the West. One point I make in the book is that the key difference in the West is geography; it is a huge, expansive area in the western Confederacy compared to the eastern Confederacy and so it has a lot more different problems, a lot more different aspects to it than the war in the East tended to.

CWBR: It seems to me that, for every stalemate that we have in the eastern theater there is a victory and some headway made in the West by Union forces. In terms of morale and maintaining foreign neutrality, was the West the Union lifeline to victory overall?

EH: That is a nice way to put it. I agree with you. That is a good way to express it. I am not sure that contemporaries, or certainly contemporaries in the West, were keenly aware that they were winning the war. I am talking about contemporaries so northern civilians in Illinois, Wisconsin, etc. The press in the East tended, of course, to be focused on their region so they tended to be focused on the stalemate and etc. And for some reason, an awful lot of foreign governments like the many people in the British government and the French government tended to focus on what was going in Virginia and probably did not pay as much attention as they should have to what was taking place in the West. So you often have scares in Washington, D.C. about British recognition and all that sort of stuff. Henry Halleck wrote a letter to William Rosecrans in December of '62 when Rosecrans was preparing to lead the Union army out of Nashville against Bragg's army at Murfreesboro that resulted in the battle of Stone's River and Halleck informed Rosecrans that Lincoln is very, very concerned that when the British Parliament meets in January that it might recognize the CSA based on the horrible defeats at Fredericksburg and that sort of stuff. And so they really kind of painted a picture to Rosecrans as if his campaign in December of '62 that

resulted in the battle of Stone's River might be the turning point in the Civil War. That is recognition that if the East is doing badly the West has an opportunity to try to take up the slack and, I think that, in the long run, that is exactly what did happen. To me, that is one more way of seeing the West as the decisive theater of the Civil War. And certainly it is true that, by early ~65, the western war is basically won and the eastern war is not yet finished. That is, of course, a big reason that Sherman decides to lead 60,000 tough, western Union soldiers, veterans of many successful campaigns and battles, to Virginia to give the final blow to Lee's hopes of holding onto Petersburg and Richmond. It is interesting to imagine Sherman and, by that time, 80,000 (Schofield's 23rd Corps was added to it), what would have happened if Lee had stayed at Petersburg and allowed Sherman to join with Grant with those 80,000 troops. You would have had an interesting development, an interesting campaign and set of battles to end the Petersburg campaign at that stage. To me, it is a telling commentary of how successful the West was, that Sherman was able to take such a huge army and march it hundreds of miles to help end the war in Virginia.

CWBR: Taking a step back then, how did black enlistment change the war for both northern and southern in the western theater?

EH: Well, that is an interesting point. In a very superficial way, you could say that it adds 180,000 troops to the Union army; that is a very; that is a gigantic contribution and even though most of those 180,000 black troops did not participate heavily in combat, they performed essential roles. The vast majority of garrisons that were necessary to protect the Mississippi River after the fall of Vicksburg consisted of black troops. Something like forty percent, I believe, of all black troops raised by the Union army over all in the Civil War were raised along the banks of the Mississippi River and those troops served almost their entire service guarding the Mississippi for northern commerce and Union military logistical support from July 4, 1863, until the end of the war. That is the kind of service that does not get much publicity or credit because people tend to focus on the battlefield instead of this sort of thing but it is fundamentally important. In less obvious ways, in other words and maybe in ways that are difficult to appreciate, in a kind of fundamental, underlying way, the recruitment of 180,000 blacks into the Union army, in a practical military sense that had a big import. You could look at it another way. Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, which was the precedent for recruiting troops was arguably unconstitutional, certainly on shaky grounds. But once you go putting 180,000 black men into blue uniforms and give them a rifle and train them how to shoot it, that confirms that

there is not going to be any backsliding in American history to try to resurrect some form of legal slavery or anything like that. It was, I think, a necessary important political and morale step intermediate between the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment which was passed by Congress in, I believe, late 1864 or early 1865 perhaps. On the Confederate side, the Confederates, as everyone knows, toyed with the idea of possibly raising black troops, finally did so very late. Whether they would have had success if they had the chance, at the time, to put it more fully into effect no one can tell. And, as everyone knows, too, the deployment of black Union troops on the battlefield tended to infuriate Confederate troops who oppose them, resulting in infamous massacres of black troops at Fort Pillow, for example which I briefly discuss in the book and in the eastern theater too. And also maltreatment, even if they are not being massacred, often when black Union soldiers were captured by Confederate soldiers they were mistreated or they were sold back into slavery or they were used as labor instead of being treated as POWs as well.

CWBR: A simple question, perhaps with broader ramifications: At what point was the war in the West officially settled in your eyes?

EH: Goodness, in terms of major activity by mainline forces, with Hood's defeat at Nashville in mid-December of '64, coupled with the decision to transfer what was left of the Army of Tennessee to North Carolina. Conceivably, if Hood's force had remained in Mississippi after December of '64 it might have done some more work too but after it was decided to shift Hood's forces, now under Johnston, over to North Carolina that kind of ended it. There was the matter of mopping up after that and there are some campaigns. Of course, there is Wilson's big cavalry raid going through Alabama and into western Central Georgia by the end of the war and there is Canby's long, long-deferred major operation to capture Mobile in March and April of '65. But in hindsight, you can see that both operations could easily have not happened and the war would have come to an end when it did anyway but nobody could have foreseen that then. But those kinds of mopping up operations are natural in such a huge expanse of theater of operations like the West where there are lots and lots of targets. And you have significant numbers of Union troops around so you might as well use them and wind up the war because you do not know when it is going to end until it does end.

CWBR: You have spent a great deal of time, in general, in studying both eastern and western theaters. In your mind, was the United States Army of the

Tennessee the most effective fighting force ever assembled?

EH: Yes, I would tend to say that. Given the comparatively modest size of that field force, barely going above 30,000 men at any time period, and given its limited resources in terms of well-trained staff officers, in terms of well-trained engineers, it improvised an awful lot. It had a lot of tough fighting ability and a lot of stamina, high morale and tremendous faith in their leaders, especially Grant and Sherman and McPherson. I think they probably liked Howard maybe a little bit less but I would, in fact, argue that Oliver Otis Howard was a better commander of the army than McPherson was. McPherson made some real mistakes in the Atlanta campaign even though he was a bright guy and a good guy. So, yes, I would say so and, on the other end of the spectrum, the Confederate Army of Tennessee, Bragg's force and Johnston's force, of course, put in the least impressive record, I guess you could say of combat effectiveness and successful campaigns, not necessarily because of any faults that rest on the shoulders of the rank and file but for a variety of other reasons too, I suppose. And the Army of the Cumberland, I would argue, is one of the more impressive field forces in terms of high levels of professionalism and innovative administrative efforts and all sorts of other things going on there too. So, I think the western theater really provided some interesting stories and histories of different units from the field armies on down to regiments that are unique in American military history.

CWBR: Professor Hess, thank you for taking the time today to discuss *The Civil War in the West: Victory and Defeat from the Appalachians to the Mississippi*.

EH: Sure, I enjoyed it. Thank you.