

The Key to the Shenandoah Valley: Geography and the Civil War Struggle for Winchester

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Recommended Citation

Ward, Johnathan M. (2024) "The Key to the Shenandoah Valley: Geography and the Civil War Struggle for Winchester," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.26.1.07

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol26/iss1/7>

Review

Winter 2024

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McCaul, Jr., Edward B. *The Key to the Shenandoah Valley: Geography and the Civil War Struggle for Winchester.* McFarland & Company, Inc., 2023. SOFTCOVER. \$39.95 ISBN 9781476683980 pp. 227.

The Key to the Shenandoah Valley offers a substantial military study of the topographical and environmental features surrounding the town of Winchester, Virginia during the Civil War. Edward McCaul focuses on six specific battles for control over the town of Winchester, but he examines these military struggles in a much larger context to indicate how the geography of the Valley was crucial to Civil War strategy. In so doing, he effectively combines environmental history, military history, and political history to reveal the importance of Winchester and its terrain. As many other scholars have noted, the Shenandoah Valley was a crucial corridor that allowed Confederates to invade northward or Union forces to press southward. Winchester, with its combination of roads (including the macadamized Valley Turnpike) and rail lines, as well as its geographic proximity to Maryland and the Potomac River, was key to controlling the strategic geography of the Valley. For individual soldiers and commanders, the physical terrain around Winchester was of utmost importance. Heavy woods shrouded visibility and hampered coordinated action. Numerous waterways often presented natural obstacles to tactical operations. Alternatively, the abundance of high ground offered key defensive positions, as did the seeming ubiquity of stone walls. Good roads provided the arteries by which Union and Confederate armies glided up and down the Valley throughout the war.

McCaul incorporates all of these natural and human-engineered environmental factors by defining “geography” in a broad sense. Topography entails human modifications to land such as

roads, canals, railroads, and bridges, McCaul writes, while geography includes natural resources, the environment, as well as topography itself. Perhaps some scholars would point out that McCaul is simply discussing environmental history with alternative terms, but however defined, McCaul's analysis in *The Key to the Shenandoah Valley* is most salient when he is appraising the combined effects of topography, geography, and environment on Civil War military forces around Winchester.

McCaul successfully draws attention to the importance of environmental factors such as weather, roads, trees, and elevated ground. In the early spring of 1862, for example, fields and roads soaked with rain and snow slowed Stonewall Jackson's capacity to attack Union forces at the First Battle of Kernstown (March 22-23, 1862). Two years later, the Second Battle of Kernstown (July 24, 1864) unfolded later in the summer, when the ground was firm, roads in good condition, and foliage in full bloom. Confederates took full advantage of this terrain, including a small knoll just south of Pritchard's Hill, to shield their movements from Union vision and win the battle. Only darkness and extreme exhaustion prevented the Confederate troops from pursuing their routed foe. During the Third Battle of Winchester (September 19, 1864), which was the largest battle for the town during the war, dry weather made for dry terrain north of the town, just south of Red Bud Run, which in turn enabled a withering cavalry charge from Union forces that sent Jubal Early's Confederate troops retreating down the Valley Pike. "The cavalry charge at Winchester is the only time during the Civil War in which a cavalry charge decided a major battle. It was the most successful large cavalry charge during the war, and the topography/geography around Winchester made it possible," McCaul contends (110). McCaul accompanies such analysis with a wealth of pictures to demonstrate the geography

around Winchester, though he acknowledges that the landscape has changed over time due to new environmental growth and industrial buildup.

Although he connects activity in the Valley to broader politics in the North and South and investigates the environmental factors of each selected battle, McCaul's study remains a technical work largely concerned with military strategy on the ground level. Consequentially, much of McCaul's work explores ground well-covered in numerous other scholarly works about the Civil War campaigns in the Shenandoah Valley, particularly Jackson's noted 1862 campaign and Philip Sheridan's triumphant conquest in 1864. The strength of this book lies in its examination of environmental and terrain factors and their influence on the fighting and strategy of armies in the Shenandoah Valley. Curiously, however, McCaul does not engage with much scholarly literature on the Civil War as environmental history such as *War Upon the Land* by Lisa Brady, *An Environmental History of the Civil War* by Judkin Browning and Timothy Silver, or other environmental histories of the war. He limits his analysis to interpreting the specific environmental and strategic conditions of six battles.

McCaul makes another curious choice with chapters 9 and 10, which include an exploration of many disparate topics related to the concept of geography, world development, and military strategy. In chapter 9, readers learn about, among many other things, the development of clean drinking water in Rome, the construction of houses for maximum cooling based on geography, the domestication of animals, the impact of cod fish on Atlantic history, domestic timber supplies in the Roman Empire and the Venetian Arsenal, the development of the British Royal Navy, the invention of gunpowder based on geographic sites, the geographic location of various diseases, and the development of the railroad. Chapter 10 in part follows the historiography of how military theorists, including Sun Tzu, Machiavelli, Clausewitz, Jomini,

Moltke, Mahan, and others, have thought about geography and warfare. These chapters are not entirely without merit, but they would better serve as independent articles for a journal, especially one dedicated to environmental history or geography. The relevance of these globe-bestriding chapters to a book otherwise dedicated to a single town in the Shenandoah Valley from 1862-1864 seems strained. Chapter 11 (“Geography and Command Decisions During the American Civil War”) and Chapter 12 (“Geography, Technology, and the American Civil War”) are similar in their grand scale but far more analytically and thematically connected to Winchester as an example of geography in Civil War America.

McCaul rightfully recommends students and scholars of the Civil War to walk directly on the battlegrounds. Like *Decisions of the 1862 Shenandoah Valley Campaign* by Robert G. Tanner, McCaul’s book would be best for battlefield tourists or military scholars who visit the Shenandoah Valley, particularly Winchester itself. McCaul’s precise depictions of battlefield terrain and army movements, along with a wealth of modern and historic maps, provide an excellent overall strategic walkthrough of this critical Civil War site.

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