H-Net Reviews
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Mark Swanson. *Atlas of the Civil War: Month By Month.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004. vii + 141 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2658-0.

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The Big Picture

Lengthy accounts of Civil War battles often leave readers with a detailed understanding of individual leaders and units, but not with an overall sense of the ebb and flow of the Confederate and Union battle lines. Even in single volume histories of the fighting, closely related movements can be recounted hundreds of pages apart. Mark Swanson sets out to rectify this imbalance of scope in this excellent reference book.

The book's more than sixty maps, designed by Swanson and Jacqueline D. Langley, are logically and aesthetically arranged for easy access and reading. On the left hand page Swanson gives a brief description of each of the major troop movements portrayed in the map on the right hand page. Though limited by space restrictions, these descriptions generally do well in balancing the big picture with the types of small details that make history come alive to the reader.

The basic map outline is identical for each month from April 1861 to April 1865, running from mid-Texas across the Gulf Coast to mid-Florida, then up the Atlantic Coast to southern Pennsylvania. This land area encompasses most of the significant military events of the war, but, as a consequence, major incidents and movements farther north–like the diversion of troops to stop urban draft riots in 1863–happen "off-map" and are noted only in that month's text description. The consistent perspective, though, does help highlight the long periods in which bloody and dramatic battles, written about in minute detail by historians and Civil War buffs alike, did surprisingly little to change the overall shape of the front lines. Introductory political and demographic maps also help frame the war's origins from the election of 1860 to the secession elections throughout the south.

Two aspects of the atlas are particularly valuable in adding to our understanding of the war. The first is the systematic integration of naval and coastal actions which all too often get short attention in popular works about the conflict. The second is attention to partisan disturbances behind the front lines. Occasional riots, unionist meetings, deserter camps, and even off-map foreign petitions, heaped more misery onto the Confederacy's already sagging shoulders.

Another fascinating feature of the atlas, though not entirely successful, is a series of thirteen maps illustrating the far west fighting between the Union and Confederacy, an aspect even scarcer in popular literature than naval and coastal battles. Unfortunately, these troop movements are relegated to an appendix with a map outline completely different from the one used for the rest of the atlas. This organization just reinforces the perception that battles in Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas were unimportant in the overall scheme of things.

Swanson's main target audiences are clearly military historians and Civil War buffs, and he has reached both audiences effectively. He may also have intended the atlas for use in Civil War or military history courses; however, the forty dollar price tag might make that prohibitive for this use. Despite the minor reservations expressed in this review, this atlas deserves a place as a valued reference book on the shelf of everyone with an interest in these tragic years.

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