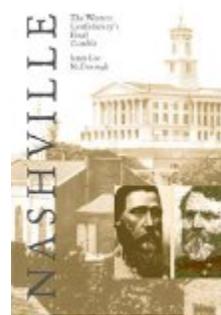


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James Lee McDonough. *Nashville: The Western Confederacy's Final Gamble*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2004. xvi + 358 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57233-322-2.

Reviewed by Ben H. Severance (Department of History, Auburn University Montgomery)  
Published on H-Tennessee (July, 2006)



## The Decisive Battle Revisited

The Confederate offensive into Middle Tennessee in the closing months of 1864 was one of the more bizarre events of the Civil War. With military defeat looming on all fronts, General John Bell Hood led a poorly provisioned and numerically inferior Rebel army on a quixotic expedition to capture the city of Nashville. Earlier works by such eminent scholars as Stanley Horn (who first described the battle as “decisive”) and Wiley Sword have thoroughly examined this ill-fated campaign, but James Lee McDonough’s *Nashville* retells the story with new insights and fresh vigor. The result is a book that can rightly be considered a coda to the author’s previous studies on the Civil War in the western theater. McDonough reaffirms the longstanding argument that Hood’s invasion was an audacious, albeit delusional, attempt to rectify the military misfortunes of the Confederacy. In the end, the Rebel defeat at Nashville permanently wrecked the Confederate Army of Tennessee. Perhaps in a moment of martial romance, however, McDonough offers a compelling rationale for what motivated rank-and-file Confederate soldiers to persevere at this late stage of the war—they were fighting desperately for “an agrarian civilization which, sans slavery, is arguably more wholesome than the life experienced by the urban masses” (p. 100).

McDonough organizes his book as a fast-paced, chronological narrative. The story begins in the aftermath of the Atlanta campaign when Hood decided to invade Middle Tennessee in the hopes of somehow disrupting Sherman’s march to the sea. McDonough then devotes two chapters to the battle of Nashville’s intriguing

prelude: the controversial episode at Spring Hill (November 29) and the sanguinary frontal assault at Franklin (November 30). The author provides one of the most lucid explanations for the confusion surrounding Spring Hill, where several Confederate generals, not just Hood, displayed an appalling miscommunication and lethargy, all of which allowed an entire Federal corps to escape seemingly certain destruction. Similarly, McDonough succinctly describes the action at Franklin, where General Hood, enraged over the missed opportunity at Spring Hill, hurled his army in an ill-advised attack against entrenched Union forces. The author’s chapter on Franklin nicely complements his previous and fuller study of this battle, *Five Tragic Hours* (1983), co-authored with Thomas L. Connelly.

The bulk of *Nashville* concentrates on the climactic battle itself. The Confederate effort in early December to besiege the city, one of the most heavily fortified on the continent, was pathetic at best. While the Rebels shivered in their makeshift redoubts and lunettes, the Federal army under General George H. Thomas methodically prepared for a powerful counter-attack; one that once delivered would rout Hood’s army back into the Deep South. Alternating his narrative between the Federal and Confederate perspectives, McDonough smoothly weaves in the contemporary observations of various participants with the scholarly commentary of an impressive host of Civil War historians. As a result, *Nashville* takes on the character of a documentary screenplay, one that keeps the focus on the combat action.

Among the strengths of the book is McDonough's excellent examination of leadership, especially at the brigade and regimental levels. The author provides dozens of informative biographical sketches of the principal officers, and he ably dissects their often-conflicting accounts of the battle, stressing that many of these men were either trying to glorify their own role or seeking to avoid blame for various failures. Hood and Thomas are certainly central figures, but the author places greater emphasis on the agency of the generals' subordinates. It is the Confederate officer corps that valiantly strives, ultimately in vain, to translate Hood's frequently ambiguous and sometimes ludicrous orders into battlefield success. Similarly, the Union officer corps displays the initiative needed to implement Thomas's overall plan to defend Middle Tennessee. Unintentionally, McDonough reduces General Thomas in particular to a supernumerary. It is John Schofield who controls Union movements in the opening weeks of the campaign; it is Emerson Opdyke who seals the enemy breach at Franklin; it is James Wilson and Sylvester Hill, among many others, who overrun the Rebel left on December 15, improvising their tactics much of the way; it is John McArthur who, largely on his own authority, resumes this devastating flank attack on December 16. After reading McDonough's account it is evident that, though Thomas was unquestionably a fine commander, any competent Union general could have won at Nashville given the size, talent, and experience of the Federal units involved.

Unlike previous studies of this battle, McDonough provides generous coverage of the activities of black soldiers at Nashville. Eight regiments of U.S. Colored Troops carried out aggressive diversionary attacks on the Rebel right flank on both days of the battle. Although bloodily repulsed each time, McDonough points out these men fought with great bravery, and that their performance contributed to Federal success by preventing Hood from reinforcing his badly depleted left flank.

The author might have noted that, after the battle of the Crater in Virginia, the battle of Nashville constitutes the largest engagement of the war involving black units. In any event, he is quite right when he states that "the magnificent attempt of the black troops seemed to deserve a better ending" (p. 231).

Like any good battle study, *Nashville* sparks a desire to engage in counterfactual debate, a favorite pastime of many Civil War scholars and buffs. What if the Confederates had indeed destroyed Federal forces at Spring Hill? What if Hood had not dispatched his most gifted general, Nathan Bedford Forrest, on a dubious venture to capture Murfreesboro, and instead that fearsome Rebel cavalryman was present throughout the so-called siege of Nashville? What if Hood had not sent a division on December 16 to reinforce his right flank when it was his left flank that was in real peril? What if Confederate general William Bate had entrenched his unit along the military crest of Shy's Hill on the Rebel left, instead of on its physical crest, thereby giving his men a better field of fire? Such debate is often academic, but McDonough does highlight some significant Confederate achievements that qualify the all-too-often one-sided depiction of this campaign. The Rebels did temporarily break through at Franklin, despite the long odds and foolhardiness of the attack. And they did firmly hold the right flank at Nashville, despite being heavily outnumbered and outgunned.

McDonough's *Nashville* is well written and thoroughly researched; it should serve as the definitive work on this battle for many years to come. To be sure, it is military history in the "guns and trumpets" style, but it ably synthesizes the existing sources and offers superb analysis. Besides, all true Civil War enthusiasts are first attracted to the topic by riveting battlefield narrative. In this sense, McDonough has crafted a book that will surely help draw in the next generation of historians.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

/~tenn/

**Citation:** Ben H. Severance. Review of McDonough, James Lee, *Nashville: The Western Confederacy's Final Gamble*. H-Tennessee, H-Net Reviews. July, 2006.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12060>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication,

originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).