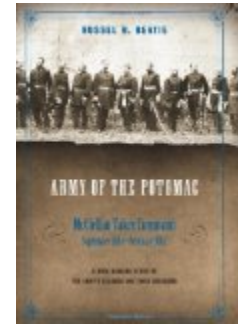


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Russel H. Beatie. *Army of the Potomac, Volume II: McClellan Takes Command, September 1861-February 1862*. Cambridge: DaCapo Press, 2004. xxxv + 636 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-306-81252-1.

Reviewed by Rick Dyson (Library, Missouri Western State University)
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McClellan's Folly

The Army of the Potomac and General George McClellan were among the most controversial actors in the Civil War, scrutinized by reporters, politicians and the public during the war. Fascination with these two pillars of Civil War history has been carried on by historians and students. The struggles of the Army of the Potomac and their flawed leader McClellan to defeat the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia preoccupied the Union war effort for the first three years of the conflict. McClellan's conduct of the war polarized the nation and retarded the Union's military efforts.

The best-known study of the Army of the Potomac is Bruce Catton's three-volume opus *The Army of the Potomac*, first published in 1953. Catton won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award in 1954 for his *A Stillness at Appomattox*. The primacy of Catton's work is cemented by the fact that the trilogy is still in print today. Catton's graceful writing appealed to the professional historian, student, as well as the public. Many future Civil War historians chose their profession and discovered their love for the study of the war in no small part because of Catton's books. As such, any monograph on the Army of The Potomac is inevitably compared with Catton's work.

Russell Beatie's multi-volume work on the Army of the Potomac promises, according to its press release, "to provide new insight for Civil War scholars and enthusiasts." Fulfilling this promise proves difficult for the author. Beatie, a retired army lieutenant and trial lawyer, is

not a professional historian and it shows in this volume. While Beatie's work is heavily documented with reams of primary sources, many of them, according to the publisher, unused until this work, the uniqueness of Beatie's insights is dubious at best. Beatie seems intent on rehabilitating McClellan's tarnished reputation. Beatie details McClellan's struggle to find qualified field commanders while having to endure Lincoln's and the state governors' political generals. He argues that McClellan, who undertook the daunting task of building a first-rate army while facing a multitude of obstacles, accomplished his goal, and that this achievement has been unfairly belittled by his contemporaries and historians.

Throughout the book, Beatie reveals his bias in many ways but most glaringly by his labeling of the Radical Republicans with the pejorative term, "Jacobins," with all its negative connotations. The author promises to provide reader with new insights into the leaders of the Army, their decisions, and the debates within the command structure of the Army. However, this discussion is sadly lacking; the vast majority of the book includes quotations and summations from various primary sources but very little analysis. Further complicating matters is Beatie's plodding writing style, which distracted this reader.

Beatie constantly meanders through subplots that distract the reader from the main point of the book or fails to connect his side forays to the overall theme of the work. While the prodigious number of sources is impressive, his use of these sources is sometimes questionable.

Beatie falls into the common trap of taking his sources at face value and not questioning the motives of the writers of a diary or letter.

Mr. Beatie is to be admired for undertaking the task of looking at the Army of the Potomac afresh; however, the finished product is disappointing. Beatie's work is

countered by two new major studies detailing the Army of the Potomac, Jeffrey Wert's *The Sword of Lincoln: The Army of the Potomac* (2005) and Stephen R. Taafe, *Commanding the Army of Potomac* (2006). Both of these titles by respected historians and researchers are to sure to be of greater value and interest to readers of this list.

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