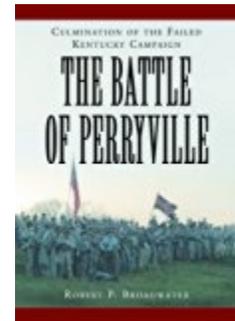


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert P. Broadwater. *Battle of Perryville, 1862: Culmination of the Failed Kentucky Campaign*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2005. viii + 200 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7864-2303-3.

Reviewed by Matthew Stanley (Independent Scholar)
Published on H-CivWar (October, 2007)



The Perryville Campaign: A Study in Miscalculation

With the emergence of dozens of new Civil War campaign studies each year, it is difficult for buffs and scholars to sift through the abundance of mediocrity and determine the works of optimum academic value. By either popular or intellectual standards, Robert P. Broadwater's *Culmination of the Failed Kentucky Campaign: The Battle of Perryville* is not among them. Although his work represents a respectable overview of the Confederate invasion to "liberate" Kentucky in the fall of 1862, Broadwater, a buff and author of more than seventeen books, voices traditional interpretations and deals chiefly with the movements of men and armies, missed strategic opportunities, and command critique and the subsequent assignment of blame, rather than the social and cultural effects of the Battle of Perryville. To be fair, *Perryville*, which traces the Kentucky campaign from its embryonic roots in July 1862 Mississippi through the rebel retreat back into Tennessee, suffers somewhat from the emergence of three superior histories of the battle since Broadwater began researching his book.[1] Despite some virtues, Broadwater's work fails to advance beyond a bullets-and-bugles history.

Broadwater's study begins by providing an overview of the campaign that ultimately proved to be the Confederate high tide in the Western Theater, and then lays out a highly readable chronological narrative. Although his research is by no means exhaustive, Broadwater's conclusions are lucid and convincing. Both armies, Broadwater alleges, were badly mishandled from the campaign's launching due to a lack of coordination between major

commanders. Accordingly, Broadwater impartially analyzes command personalities, particularly those of Confederate General Braxton Bragg and Union Major Generals Don Carlos Buell and Charles Gilbert, and concludes that both armies suffered from hapless generalship. In fact, Broadwater praises Bragg for devising such a well-developed operational plan and for the fact that Union leaders, including Buell and Andrew Johnson, were genuinely unaware of Confederate intentions throughout most of the campaign. Although the campaign's culminating battle at Perryville was a tactical stalemate, Bragg's superseding dilemma—that "the men of Kentucky would not enlist unless the army was there to stay, and the army could not remain in the state unless the men of Kentucky enlisted"—helped ensure Confederate defeat (p. 157). Yet by failing to destroy the crippled rebel Army of Tennessee before it retreated back into its namesake state, Buell's army let pass an immense opportunity, and in effect lost the campaign by not winning it.

Though Broadwater seems at times to be a Bragg apologist (he oddly suggests a counterfactual outcome of the battle after which Bragg is placed alongside Jackson, Lee, and Stuart in the Confederate pantheon of heroes), his account is generally compelling. Broadwater emphasizes the Confederate political imperative, the "battle" to win local support through propaganda, and the necessity of a significant rebel battlefield victory to achieve Confederate success in the campaign. Broadwater also sees Perryville as very much a "soldier's battle" on both sides. Like Kenneth W. Noe's model study, *Perryville:*

This Grand Havoc of Battle (2001), Broadwater's work credits the fighting men and mid-level commanders, such as Captain Ebenezer Gay, as the true heroes of the engagement. In addition, *Perryville* provides an adequate tactical study of the engagement, though it remains inferior to the work of Noe and Kenneth A. Hafendorfer in that regard. Though most of his explanations are persuasive, Broadwater's biggest failing is his unwillingness to push his evidence in a new interpretational direction. The rawness of troops on both sides remains an overt theme throughout. Aside from consistently highlighting the subtle and obvious discrepancies between raw and veteran troops, including the effects of marching, combat, and morale, Broadwater sees Perryville as a "trial by fire" or a "second Shiloh," and in most respects he is correct (p. 43). He asserts that generals demonstrated a willingness to liberally promote unproven officers due to a shortage of established talent in the ranks, leading to a somewhat meteoric rise of commanders "new to their duties" (p. 51). Novice brigades were typical, particularly in the Federal army, and Broadwater interestingly juxtaposes Union General William Terrell's recruits and Confederate Major General Benjamin Franklin Cheatham's veterans they opposed (p. 91). *Perryville* rightly concludes that the entire campaign was a test of wills between the individual soldier rather than a demonstration in strategic or tactical acumen. Yet Broadwater also makes the dubious contention that "the mere fact that [raw Union recruits] were in the army was one of the primary reasons why the invasion of Kentucky had been made in the first place" (p. 43). *Perryville* also touches on some current topics in the scholarship. Broadwater discusses conceptions of manliness and moral courage as exemplified by Union Colonel John T. Wilder's surrender at the Battle of Munfordville. Nevertheless, Broadwater largely fails to integrate some interesting evidence into the broader literature of soldier studies or the new military history. Broadwater's conclusions also suffer from a problem of sources. Although Broadwater sets out to "use the soldier's memories" to "tell the story of the battle through the eyes of the men who fought it," he relies primarily on inadequate or antiquated sources including dated campaign studies, reminiscences, regimental histories, and postwar veterans' magazines.[1] For instance, he accepts one soldier's reminiscence at face value in a section explaining desertion rates (p. 43). Other chapters rely on gratuitous, full-length letters by Bragg and other officers, many of which disrupt the flow of the narrative. Likewise, Broadwater uses virtually no new evidence and neglects to utilize many supportive and available sources, including the Don Carlos Buell Papers. Furthermore,

Perryville, which sometimes seems like an abbreviated Hafendorfer redux, fails to integrate the sources in a manner that maximizes social and cultural contextualization. Despite its somewhat ineffectual utilization of some common-soldier memoirs and reminiscences, Broadwater's work is largely a top-down approach written from the perspective of the headquarters field tent rather than the soldier's eye. The superfluity of drum-and-trumpet campaign studies also tends to detract from a number of more immediate and weighty themes within the literature, including the reality of combat.

In addition to employing somewhat archaic evidence, Broadwater also furthers dated interpretations. He insists that the Perryville campaign, for example, "gave the North the ability to bring its overwhelming resources to bear in a long war it could not lose" (p. 5). Not only does this rationalization champion the defunct "Lost Cause" school of thought, it also promotes a sort of industrial determinism by implying that superior national resource capacities always translate to victories on the battlefield.

Yet Broadwater's work possesses some aspects of considerable merit. Never guilty of miscalculation or having an axe to grind, Broadwater's prose is consistently judicious, workmanlike, and highly comprehensible. His overriding contention that the entire Perryville campaign was characterized by "mistakes and misconceptions" and was ultimately disappointing for both sides is undeniable (p. 80). Moreover, *Perryville* taps into a few modish trends within the literature, including combat motivation and soldiers' conceptions of manliness and courage.[2] The author also does some interesting number-crunching regarding the battle's high proportion of casualties and correctly claims that "in terms of percentages engaged, the casualties suffered by the Union army at Perryville were higher than those suffered at Gettysburg" (p. 155). Broadwater appropriately places most of the blame for the Union's "golden opportunity lost" on Buell and Gilbert, rather than fêting what was in actuality shoddy Confederate leadership for their tactical battlefield victory (p. 129). Despite both armies perceiving the campaign as a critical failure (the Confederates for not seizing Kentucky and the Federals for not destroying Bragg's army), at battle's end, Broadwater proposes, "soldiers in the ranks could clearly see that generalship, not their own fighting ability, was the reason for the failure" (p. 147). Also appealing among the book's conclusion is the author's allegation that the Kentucky campaign "demonstrated need for rapid movements [of comparatively small armies operating in enemy territory]," a dictum that both sides developed after 1862 in the form of

mobile raids (p. 159). Overall, Broadwater's arguments are clear and astute, and his narrative, despite a virtual absence of maps, provides an accessible entryway into this once understudied and misunderstood campaign.[2]

Nevertheless, the ultimate limitation of *Perryville* remains its narrow academic appeal and inability to reveal anything new about the significance of the campaign. At last, this reader found himself wanting Broadwater's "commemoration" of a book to be something it is not. Of all the work done on Perryville, only fragments of Kenneth W. Noe's work contribute to our cultural understanding of the battle, how individual soldiers felt about the nature of the combat, or the battle's place in historical memory. Although works such as Broadwater's by no means constitute "poor history," they ultimately fall short by failing to push the literature in a more constructive direction.

Notes

[1]. For academic works on the Kentucky campaign and the battle of Perryville see Kenneth A. Hafendorfer, *Perryville: Battle for Kentucky* (Louisville: Kentucky Historical Press, 1991); James Lee McDonough, *War in Kentucky: From Shiloh to Perryville* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994); Earl J. Hess, *Banners to the Breeze: The Kentucky Campaign, Corinth, and Stone's River* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000); Kenneth W. Noe, *Perryville: This Grand Havoc of Battle* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001).

[2]. Although Broadwater provides a general tactical summary of the battle, he regrettably fails to supplement his explanations with ample maps. Consult Noe's *Perryville: This Grand Havoc of Battle* for the most satisfying and accurate maps of the campaign and battle yet published.

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

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

Citation: Matthew Stanley. Review of Broadwater, Robert P., *Battle of Perryville, 1862: Culmination of the Failed Kentucky Campaign*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. October, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13759>

Copyright © 2007 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.