

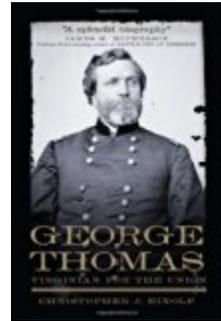
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Christopher J. Einolf. *George Thomas: Virginian for the Union*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007. xi + 413 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-3867-1.

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The Rock of Chickamauga Revealed?

George Thomas is an excellent, but perhaps not quite definitive, book about an outstanding, but perhaps not quite great, general. Although both the book and its subject in many ways fully merit the label “splendid” that James M. McPherson (on the book cover/jacket) uses to describe the former, both suffer from limitations that are and were principally external. There is no doubt that George H. Thomas was one of the most successful and important generals of the Civil War. By September 1863, a victory at Mill Springs, service as one of Henry W. Halleck’s principal subordinates in the Corinth campaign, and performance as by far the most important of the general officers who served under Don Carlos Buell and William S. Rosecrans during the Perryville, Stones River, and Tullahoma campaigns ensured Thomas would figure prominently in any history of the Union war effort in the West. Then, at the Battle of Chickamauga, Thomas earned eternal glory for his stalwart defense of Snodgrass Ridge and one of the great nicknames in American military history—the Rock of Chickamauga. He took Rosecrans’s place as commander of the Army of the Cumberland, and at Chattanooga, it was an unauthorized assault by Thomas’s command on what appeared to be an impregnable Confederate position on Missionary Ridge that carried the day. After Chattanooga, Thomas commanded by far the largest command in the army group William T. Sherman led to victory in the Atlanta campaign, after which Thomas received the task of dealing with the Confederate invasion of Tennessee of late 1864 and won a decisive victory at the Battle of Nashville. It was by any measure a distinguished record that fully merited for

Thomas an honored place in the pantheon of Union war heroes.

And yet, while historians have generally offered positive assessments of Thomas’s career, few have deigned to include Thomas on the list of history’s truly great captains. No doubt the most important reason is the lack of any point in Thomas’s career in which he demonstrated genius as an independent commander. True, he won victories at Mill Springs and Nashville, and as Rosecrans’s principal advisor during the masterly maneuvers that brought Tullahoma and Chattanooga into federal possession, he deserves considerable credit for those triumphs of Union arms. Likewise, Thomas’s service in the Atlanta campaign, both for the wise counsel he provided Sherman and the fact that the forces under his command were the largest and most actively engaged in the campaign, merited far greater commendation than Sherman granted during or after the war. Still, the Battle of Mill Springs was a relatively small engagement in which Confederate forces were poorly managed, while at Nashville, Thomas faced an operational and tactical situation in which he enjoyed such great advantages that only the grossest of blunders could have prevented the federals from winning a decisive victory. And, of course, while there is no doubt that Thomas provided good advice to Rosecrans and Sherman, it is one thing to be an advisor and fount of ideas and quite another to have full responsibility for decisions and their consequences.

Indeed, at no point in his career did Thomas face a

serious crisis in a major campaign in which the responsibility was all his, defeat was a real possibility, and he was compelled to act and think boldly, creatively, and decisively. (True, he handled the crisis on the second day at Chickamauga with magnificent skill, but Thomas's actions that day were in response to events, and he was able to act in confidence because regardless of what happened that day responsibility for the defeat of the Army of the Cumberland would not rest with him.) Could he have handled such a situation and placed the question of his greatness as a commander beyond doubt? There is a good case to be made that the answer to this question is "probably," but, of course, we will never know for sure, as Thomas never got the opportunity to prove himself as an independent commander and seal his stature as a great general. This was largely Thomas's misfortune and hardly his fault.

At the same time, there is evidence that while Ulysses S. Grant and Sherman were not completely fair in their treatment of Thomas, either during the war or in their postwar writings, they may well have been correct in sensing there was something lacking in him; specifically, the ability, energy, or will to recognize opportunities and take risks to seize them when they came his way. When faced with the great decision that all Southern officers in the U.S. Army faced in 1860 and 1861, Thomas's commendable decision to remain with the Union, which undoubtedly required considerable moral courage, was perhaps an easier and more predictable course for him to take because it let him stay with what he knew. Likewise, when the opportunity to command in a crisis came during the Perryville campaign, Thomas refused to accept it. While it is reasonable for observers to see in these episodes evidence of a noble and selfless commitment to duty and selflessness in Thomas's character, a case can also be made that in both instances Thomas revealed a preference for following the path of least resistance and passively riding the winds of fortune. Perhaps Thomas was simply one of those men who operated well when supervised and in controlled situations, but was incapable of seizing opportunities and wary of expanded responsibility when they carried significant risks. But we have no way of determining whether or not this was the case, for the general's wife ensured his personal papers were destroyed after her death and thus denied historians access to sources that might have provided insights into Thomas's mind and character that are unavailable in the public record. This is the principal reason that Christopher J. Einolf's book—and perhaps no study of Thomas's life—can be considered truly definitive. More-

over, Thomas died too soon after the war to participate in Century's Battles and Leaders series and never wrote a memoir—although through a friend, he and his wife did see that a record of his take on some matters was made.

To his great credit, Einolf has done yeoman work tracking down primary source material that previous students of Thomas had missed and uses these effectively to provide insights into the general, especially his life before and after the war. Einolf also endeavors with as much success as is probably possible to compensate for the limits of the primary source material from the war itself by drawing on works on Southern Unionists by Richard Current and others in an effort to explain and provide context for Thomas's decision to remain loyal to the Union. Einolf also draws on and demonstrates his clear familiarity with recent scholarship by Peter Cozzens, Kenneth Noe, Larry Daniel, James McDonough, Albert Castel, and others on Thomas's campaigns.[1] Those inclined to quibble may note the failure to mention Kenneth Hafendorfer's study of Mill Springs.[2] And, the healthy percentage of citations from secondary sources rather than primary sources in the notes for the chapters on Thomas's military campaigns, while satisfactory and sensible to most readers, may not sit well with some. Nonetheless, even those readers will enjoy and find value in Einolf's clear prose and well-reasoned analysis of events.

While Einolf commendably endeavors to fairly and thoroughly address all sides of the various issues and controversies that surrounded the general's life and career, he joins most historians in offering a very positive assessment of Thomas and makes a strong case for doing so. The account of Thomas's evolution from slaveholding Virginian to defender of African American rights as a commander during Reconstruction is especially interesting, informative, and warmly presented, although Einolf does indulge in a bit of hyperbole when he proclaims that studying Thomas will help "place the issues of race and slavery back at the center of Civil War history" (p. 356). A cursory survey of modern literature—excluding a fairly well marginalized band of neo-Confederate authors—offers little to suggest that there is a need for a reminder of the centrality of race and slavery in mainstream Civil War history.

In the final analysis, though, Einolf has made an excellent and welcome contribution to Civil War literature. It certainly seems safe to predict that this book will quickly supplant earlier works by Francis McKinney, Freeman Cleaves, and Frank Palumbo in the minds

of Civil War historians as the best study of the Rock of Chickamauga.[3]

Notes

[1]. Peter Cozzens, *No Better Place to Die: The Battle of Stones River* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990); Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound: The Battle of Chickamauga* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992); Cozzens, *The Shipwreck of Their Hopes: The Battles for Chattanooga* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Kenneth Noe, *Perryville: This Grand Havoc of Battle* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001); Larry Daniel, *Days of Glory: The Army of the Cumberland* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2004); James McDonough, *Stones River: Bloody Winter in Tennessee* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1980); McDonough, *Chattanooga: A Death Grip on the Confederacy* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984); McDonough, *War in Kentucky: From Shiloh to Perryville* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994); McDonough, *Nashville: The Western Confederacy's Final Gamble* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2004); Albert Castel, *Decision in the West: The Atlanta Campaign of 1864* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992); Castel, "Prevaricating through Georgia:

Sherman's Memoirs as a Source on the Atlanta Campaign," *Civil War History* 40 (March 1994), 48-71; Richard McMurry, *Atlanta 1864: Last Chance for the Confederacy* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000); Wiley Sword, *Embrace an Angry Wind: The Confederacy's Last Hurrah—Spring Hill, Franklin, and Nashville* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); Sword, *Mountains Touched with Fire: Chattanooga Besieged, 1863* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995); Anne Bailey, *The Chessboard of War: Sherman and Hood in the Autumn Campaign of 1864* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000).

[2]. Kenneth Hafendorfer, *Mill Springs: Campaign and Battle of Mill Springs, Kentucky* (Louisville: KH Press, 2001).

[3]. Francis F. McKinney, *Education in Violence: The Life of George H. Thomas and the History of the Army of the Cumberland* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1961); Freeman Cleaves, *Rock of Chickamauga: The Life of General George H. Thomas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1948); Frank A. Palumbo, *George Henry Thomas: The Dependable General* (Dayton, OH: Morning-side Books, 1983).

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