

# H-Net Reviews

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Earl C. Hastings, Jr., David Hastings. *A Pitiless Rain: The Battle of Williamsburg, 1862*. Shippensburg, Pa.: White Mane Publishing, 1997. ix + 160 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57249-042-0.

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When Americans think of Williamsburg, most see an image of the capital of eighteenth-century Virginia, restored by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Few associate it with a battle that occurred on May 4-5, 1862, during Gen. George B. McClellan's Peninsula campaign. Local buffs know that this fight has long been overshadowed by the town's picturesque colonial past. Even Civil War historians have neglected what has often been thought of as a rearguard action, which occurred when McClellan's army struck Gen. Joseph E. Johnston's retreating force. The battle of Williamsburg has been lost in the carnage that followed at Seven Pines and the Seven Days. *A Pitiless Rain* is the first modern study, and features men who would soon be famous, including Joseph Hooker, Winfield Scott Hancock, George Stoneman, David Birney, and Hiram Berry, as well as the Hills, Richard Anderson, Jubal Early, Jeb Stuart, and George Pickett. One of the authors lives in the immediate vicinity, and both know the battlefield and the surrounding area thoroughly. Taking Macaulay as their model, they not only talk the talk of Civil War military history, they also walk the walk, having visited many obscure sites, most of them unmarked and on land that is privately owned or otherwise inaccessible to the casual tourist. The authors have read all of the major contemporary accounts and secondary works, and they have used valuable primary sources in the archives of Colonial Williamsburg and the College of William and Mary.

The heart of the book describes the roads to Williamsburg, why a battle occurred there, how it was fought, and its inconclusive result. The defenses east of the town were the product of three quite different engineers. West Point professor Dennis Hart Mahan's textbook, *A Treatise on Field Fortifications* (1846), greatly influenced the design of the large bastion forts and smaller redoubts and redans that shaped the struggle. William and Mary president Benjamin S. Ewell, a friend of Mahan's at the Academy, laid out the line. Capt. Alfred Rives supervised its construction and somewhat modified the design. The Confederate force sent back by Johnston to defend

the town and buy time for his retreat was too small to defend the entire line, and instead concentrated on key points, using creeks, marshy ground, heavily wooded terrain, and a huge ravine to augment their defenses. The Union army then tried to exploit the weakness of other positions. The initial fighting on Sunday, May 4, ended after dark. The main battle came on Monday, May 5, 1862. Union veterans years later remembered three things about the battle: the driving torrents of rain, the arrival of one-armed Gen. Philip Kearney's division after 2 p.m. as Hooker's attack on the Confederate center was failing, and Hancock's flanking of the Confederate left. Hancock moved from the right center of the Union line to the north and circled around the rebels, planning to attack down the Queen's Creek Road. An order from Gen. Edwin V. Sumner to fall back to a safer position sent Hancock into the sort of blasphemous rage for which he became notorious. Delaying his withdrawal as long as possible, by 5:00 P.M. rebels were closing fast on his exposed position. Hancock then fought a superb defensive struggle against Jubal Early's brigade, including the 24th Virginia, and Col. Duncan McRae's 5th North Carolina, which lost about 252 of its original 460 men, mostly in retreat under heavy fire. Over 20,000 men were engaged, many of them fighting in tangled woods much like the Wilderness. And like that more famous battle, some of the casualties were crushed by falling trees, while many of the wounded burned alive after the battle, before they could be rescued.

The authors debunk many of the stories about the campaign, such as George A. Custer single-handedly killing or driving off Confederates at a burning bridge and then extinguishing the flames so that Gen. William F. "Baldy" Smith's division could cross a stream, but they commit their share of errors. Gen. John B. Magruder did not march his small army about in a repetitive, circular fashion at the Yorktown-Warwick River line, thus frightening McClellan and causing him to halt his approach up the Peninsula. However, the authors repeat this traditional account as if it were true. On Magruder's

drinking, they hedge. Paul D. Casdorff's recent biography appeared too late to be consulted by the authors, but it reached a somewhat more critical, and precise, judgment. The Hastings explain that Johnston's actions after assuming command "greatly disturbed Magruder and eventually led to a problem with his health" (p. 27). It might be more accurate to say that he could not accept being displaced from command and crawled back into the bottle. Confederate Secretary of War George Wythe Randolph, "a prominent lawyer and politician in Richmond" (p. 26), was described by J. B. Jones as a man "of modest pretensions, who, although he has lived for several years in this city, does not seem to have a dozen acquaintances" (*A Rebel War Clerk's Diary* [1866], I, 117). Cadets graduating from West Point at the bottom of their class were assigned to the cavalry, specifically the mounted rifles or the dragoons, not the infantry. Nor is it odd that when Union troops entered Williamsburg on May 6 they found abandoned Confederate articles, including playing cards. Cards were often discarded before a battle by guilt-ridden

or pious soldiers in a Victorian era that associated them with sin and gambling. A dozen typos also mar the text, most irritatingly the pronominal possessive "its," which is rendered with an apostrophe, both in the authors' own text and in quotations (pp. 10, 13, 41, 43, and passim). The names of historians such as David Herbert Donald, Allan Nevins, and Emory M. Thomas are garbled or misspelled, as is Mahan's book title, "Triest" for *Treatise*. The authors have worked on this project for decades, as evidenced by their introduction and acknowledgments, and a 1973 article, "Encounter in the Rain," cited in the bibliography. Unfortunately, the volume was not carefully edited. The research, thesis, and conclusions of *A Piti- less Rain* are persuasive, but the book bears many of the marks of a rush job and does not meet the publisher's usual high standards.

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