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Robert P. Broadwater. *The Battle of Fair Oaks: Turning Point of McClellan's Peninsula Campaign.* Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2011. 219 pp. $35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-5878-3.

Reviewed by Wilson Greene (Pamplin Historical Park)
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The Battle of Fair Oaks, or Seven Pines as it is more commonly known, was the largest engagement in the eastern theater of the Civil War at the time it occurred. Fought over a two-day period, May 31 to June 1, 1862, the battle generated more than 11,000 total casualties, although it did little to change the operational situation of the two armies contending for control of Richmond, the Confederate capital.

With the exception of a competent if little-known monograph by Steven H. Newton (*The Battle of Seven Pines, May 31-June 1, 1862*, 1993), this sizable clash between the forces of Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston (who fell wounded near the close of the first day's combat) and Union commander George B. McClellan, has received little attention from historians except as a chapter in larger studies of the entire Peninsula Campaign. The battlefield itself is rarely visited, as twentieth-century development has blanketed the historic landscape, save for an evocative little National Cemetery at the contest's key road intersection.

Thus, a new study detailing the context, conduct, and consequences of the Battle of Fair Oaks/Seven Pines would be a welcome addition to the literature on the war. Unfortunately, Robert Broadwater's book will be a disappointment to readers hoping for such a fresh examination of a little-studied but large-scale Civil War battle.

Only 46 of 177 pages of text–two chapters out of eight–detail the course of the combat, and in so doing offer little new information. The bulk of the narrative concentrates on the background and progress of the entire Peninsula Campaign, including the Seven Days battles in June and July. Stephen W. Sears's masterful *To the Gates of Richmond: The Peninsula Campaign* (1992) remains the standard monograph on the subject (although Broadwater cites Sears only once), denying *The Battle of Fair Oaks* any claim to plowing new ground. The author referenced few manuscripts, a modest number of published primary works, and apparently overlooked many of the best standard secondary sources relevant to his topic. In addition to omitting Newton's sound book and Sears's biography of McClellan (*George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon*, 1988), Broadwater consulted a dated and discredited biography of Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson rather than the much superior study by James I. Robertson, Jr. (*Stonewall Jackson: The Man, the Soldier, the Legend,* 1997) and ignored excellent books by John V. Quarstein, the campaign's closest student, Earl C. Hastings, Jr., and David Hastings, *A Pitiless Rain: The Battle of Williamsburg, 1862* (1997); Carol K. Dubbs (*Defend this Old Town*, 2004), and Brian Burton *(Extraordinary Circumstances: The Seven Days Battles,* 2001), to name a few.

This is not to say that Broadwater mimics Sears's interpretation of the campaign, which focuses on the shortcomings of the Federal commander. On the contrary, *The Battle of Fair Oaks* unabashedly defends McClellan's efforts to capture Richmond in the spring of 1862, declaring that McClellan's operations "were conducted in a masterly fashion" (p. 136) and asserting that Little Mac "remains today one of the most popular leaders in American military history" (p. 133). Writes Broadwater, "to his critics, [McClellan] seemed slow and meticulous, but his movements were deliberate and well thought-out" (p. 136).

Broadwater paints McClellan as the victim of a broad conspiracy rooted in Congress, the War Department, and even the White House, designed to ensure his failure and based on a divergence of political views as to the nature of the war. Of course, this was McClellan's own contention as expressed in his memoirs as well as his private and public contemporary correspondence, and in Broadwater Little Mac finds a sympathetic pen.

At the end of the day, however, the author's defense of McClellan is as unpersuasive as is the assertion expressed in the subtitle of his book regarding the strategic significance of the Battle of Fair Oaks. Ironically, in the epilogue, where Broadwater summarizes

his arguments, he ascribes Lee's failure to destroy the Army of the Potomac not to any masterful generalship on the part of George McClellan but to the failure of Lee's subordinates–a plausible explanation but one that does McClellan no credit and thus is at odds with the primary thesis presented in the text. As for the pivotal role of the Battle of Fair Oaks, Broadwater accurately characterizes the first day's fighting as "inconclusive" (p. 113) and describes the futility of the Confederate attacks on June 1. He presents no evidence–indeed no case–that the large engagement along the Williamsburg and Nine Mile roads east of Richmond changed the calculus of McClellan's campaign at all. Defending George McClellan's leadership during the Peninsula Campaign and suggesting that Fair Oaks represented a critical turning point therein are difficult positions to substantiate, and Broadwater falls short with both endeavors.

In addition to these failed premises, Broadwater's book includes errors of fact and geography too numerous to catalog. He declares both Winfield Scott and George McClellan as "commanders in chief" of the Union armies (pp. 18-19), states that the *CSS Virginia* sunk the *Roanoke* in Hampton Roads (p. 26), places McClellan's base of supplies at West Point rather than White House Landing (pp. 91, 136), and ascribes the largest regimental loss suffered by any Confederate unit during the war–59 percent– to the 6th Alabama at Seven Pines (p. 103). Broadwater tells us that the intended landing place for the Union army attacking Norfolk was Chesapeake Bay (p. 70), that forts Monroe and Wool prevented the *Virginia* from passing through the Chesapeake River (p. 71), and that the Virginia Central Railroad connected Richmond with northern Virginia (p. 82). Moreover, Broadwater demonstrates an imperfect knowledge of the modern landscape about which he is writing. He misplaces, for example, the preserved and sign-posted Fort Magruder in Williamsburg at a hotel named after that installation (p. 63) and declares that "a solitary iron slab marks the location of Porter's victory at Mechanicsville" (p. 177), when the National Park Service has preserved and interpreted a key portion of that battlefield for decades.

It is clear that McFarland Press did little copyediting before bringing this book to publication as the text is littered with spelling, grammatical, and typographical errors. Broadwater's methodology for citing his sources is unconventional. Quotations are ascribed to the secondary sources where he found them, rather than the original. Some passages go completely undocumented. The bibliography cites collections with no repositories and repositories with no collections, all neatly arranged alphabetically.

The book is richly illustrated with modern and contemporary photographs although the maps do little to enhance the narrative. Broadwater's writing style, if not elegant, is straightforward and entirely accessible to all readers.

The Battle of Fair Oaks comes across as a shallowly researched, factually challenged, and interpretively suspect accounting of the Peninsula Campaign with more than a hint of a specific agenda. Broadwater's demonizing of the Congressional Republicans, the characterization of the campaign as one of "states' rights against the Federal government" (p. 22), and several assertions that the Confederate army employed black soldiers (pp. 56, 116) also raise questions about Broadwater's approach.

Regrettably then, *The Battle of Fair Oaks: Turning Point of McClellan's Peninsula Campaign* does not deliver on its promise of providing a careful accounting of a major, if understudied, Civil War battle and makes little effort to demonstrate that its significance in the context of the Peninsula Campaign was much greater than bringing Robert E. Lee to command of the Army of Northern Virginia.

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