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Philip Gerard. *The Last Battleground: The Civil War Comes to North Carolina.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019. 362 pp. $28.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4696-4956-6.

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Philip Gerard's *The Last Battleground: The Civil War Comes to North Carolina* is a project that grew out of the recent Civil War sesquicentennial. It did not begin as a book project at all but rather as a series of articles published during the sesquicentennial years by *Our State: Celebrating North Carolina*, a magazine begun in 1933 and originally titled *The State*, which highlights travel, food, culture, and all things North Carolina. Gerard, a creative writing professor at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, admits his surprise at being asked to write such a series considering the many noted Civil War historians from the state. However, the magazine's editor did not want "the settled perspective of an expert writing with perfect hindsight" and thus targeted Gerard, who would not "bring any preconceived notions" to the project (p. ix).

This book is not Gerard's first foray into North Carolina history. He dipped his toes into those waters with his historical novel, *Cape Fear Rising* (1994), based on the actual events surrounding the 1898 coup d'etat and massacre in Wilmington. The *Our State* project, however, was not fiction but rather history written for a popular audience. The criteria laid out for this series of stories was threefold: each story had to connect to North Carolina in some significant way; the stories were to focus not only on generals, battles, etc., but also on ordinary people; and all stories were to be written in the present tense as if events were unfolding in front of readers' eyes. As a result, this collection of stories, now in book form, covers a wide range of topics from the most obscure private soldier's story and the plight of women, children, and minorities, to the great battles fought on North Carolina soil and experiences of the leaders, both political and military, who called the shots during the great national crisis. Some of these stories are familiar and oft-told, while others are probably appearing in print for the first time.

Gerard had to become a historian in his own right to do this project justice. His acknowledgments show that he consulted a number of academic historians (particularly Chris E. Fonvielle Jr. and Mark Bradley), archivists, librarians, and public history professionals at many institutions across North Carolina. The book's "Selected Sources" section contains a wide range of secondary sources, along with a handful of published primary sources. The volume is also well indexed. The true strength of this work, however, is Gerard's writing, as his ability to tell a good story is without question. Most of the chapters, or stories, are four-to-six pages long, and each is engaging and moves quickly. When reading these stories, one never gets the feeling of being bogged down.

Though Gerard does not seem to intentionally weave themes through the stories, a few nevertheless emerge. One is the theme of desertion, which is highlighted throughout. This is appropriate, as scholars have shown that North Carolina soldiers deserted the army at a higher rate than those in most other states. In numerous instances Gerard highlights the multiple reasons for this trend, always showing empathy to the deserters. Gerard is also sympathetic to the dilemma of women and children on the home front, left to fend for themselves in very trying circumstances. Another theme that is woven throughout is the plight of North Carolina's African American population, enslaved and free. Through the stories, he shows how their status shifted over the course of the conflict, and how in some cases they became active participants in the fight for their own freedom.

During the sesquicentennial, Gerard's articles in *Our State* were met with mixed reviews. Depending on whom one was polling, readers either loved the articles or hated them. Most of the negative feelings toward the articles came from Civil War buffs who disagreed with either his facts or his analysis of events. Some readers simply took issue with a non-historian writing history, but in so doing they were missing the point of the series. This is not to deny that there are some issues with these stories, in both fact and interpretation.

In some instances, Gerard betrays his limited knowledge of military history and material culture. For example, when he discusses the equipment that soldiers carried into battle, he erroneously states that the Union forces used a different, less injurious type of bayonet than the Confederates. In fact, the standard bayonet used by both sides was the same triangular blade socket bayonet. Later, in writing about the naval bombardment of Fort Fisher, he refers to some of the Union vessels as "dreadnoughts," a term that did not come into usage until the early twentieth century (p. 281).

Some readers will also take issue with some of Gerard's interpretations. As the story of Zebulon Vance's actions at the Battle of New Bern in March 1862 unfolds, Gerard depicts him as a hero during the retreat due to his efforts to procure boats for his men to cross Brice's Creek, but he fails to mention that Vance nearly drowned while trying to cross the creek. Additionally, in a story about Alamance County families, Gerard writes that Judge Thomas Ruffin "employs" about one hundred slaves on his plantation and then details Ruffin's cruelty as a master (p. 128). This word choice is unfortunate, as slaves were viewed as property and were owned by their masters, not employed by them. Finally, when writing about military governor Edward A. Stanly and his attitude toward the African American population of eastern North Carolina, Gerard states that by denying them education, Stanly was "honoring a state law that is at odds with a principal aim of the war" (p. 193). The incident in question occurred in May 1862, but it can be argued that emancipation was not a principal Union war aim until Abraham Lincoln issued the final Emancipation Proclamation eight months later. While some Union military officers did support emancipation and equal rights for newly freed slaves, those goals did not motivate most white Northerners to fight during the war's first year.

These and other factual and interpretative problems exist, but they detract little from the overall stories being told. Unfortunately, there are no footnotes or endnotes, leading the reader to wonder about Gerard's sources for direct quotations and many other facts. Some readers will want to fact check things in this book, as I did many times. To many historians, this is lamentable and limits the book's usefulness as a resource. Other readers will also struggle with Gerard's use of the present tense, as most are simply not accustomed to reading history written in that way. However, if one chooses to portray the book in a

negative light because of these issues, one is missing the point.

What Gerard created, at the behest of the editor of ***Our State***, is a collection of human-interest stories meant to appeal to the general reader, not a scholarly, academic tome that breaks new ground in Civil War history or presents any new interpretations. If one approaches this book in that manner, it will prove to be a lively and enjoyable read. Should one choose to pick it apart and find all its faults, the point has most definitely been missed.