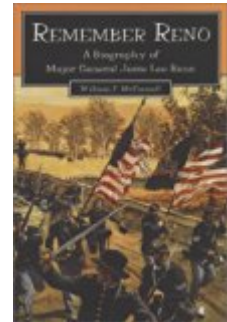


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

William F. McConnell. *Remember Reno: A Biography of Major General Jesse Lee Reno*. Shippenburg, Penn.: White Mane Publishing, 1996. xi + 113 pp. \$19.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57249-020-8.

Reviewed by Ethan S. Rafuse (Department of History, University of Missouri-Kansas City)
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Although he turned in solid performances in Ambrose Burnside's 1862 operations along the North Carolina coast and the Second Manassas (Bull Run) campaign, at no point did Jesse Lee Reno's leadership play a particularly decisive role in shaping the ultimate outcome of the Civil War. Indeed, to most students of the war, Reno is best known for receiving mention in an outburst by a frustrated fellow officer in the aftermath of the Union debacle at Second Manassas and for getting himself killed leading the Ninth Corps at Fox's Gap during the Battle of South Mountain on September 14, 1862. Given his limited impact on the course of the Union war effort, scholars and buffs alike could easily be forgiven for not saving a spot on their bookshelves for the first Reno biography.

Yet by using Reno's experiences to shed light on the social and institutional dynamics that shaped life in the antebellum army officer corps, providing detailed descriptions of Reno's role in the battles and campaigns in which he participated, or offering a cogent analysis of the challenges associated with commanding a brigade or division in the Union Army, William F. McConnell could have made *Remember Reno* a worthwhile contribution to Civil War scholarship. Unfortunately, his failure to do any of these things, in combination with a number of other problems, renders this first book-length (and I use this term loosely—the actual text comes to fewer than 100 pages) study of Reno's life a work of narrow interest and limited value.

On the positive side, McConnell has produced a clear, straightforward, and entertaining narrative that should satisfy most general readers. The book provides particularly interesting descriptions of Reno's service in the

army between the Mexican and Civil Wars, his confrontation with future president, then lieutenant colonel, Rutherford B. Hayes during the Maryland campaign, and a number of interesting photographs. The maps, taken from previously published works, are generally good and well-placed in the text (although readers might be excused if, from looking at the map of Maryland on p. 77, they were to presume that Fox's Gap is part of the Catoctin Mountain range rather than South Mountain).

The book's value is severely diminished, however, by its uneven and often shallow treatment of the various battles and campaigns in which Reno participated. Although he provides fine descriptions of Reno's service in North Carolina and at the battle of Chantilly, McConnell provides only a cursory treatment of his actions during most of the Second Manassas campaign. The book's description of the contest for Fox's Gap likewise fails to offer significant insights or information that could not be gleaned from Stephen (misspelled as "Steven" in the notes and bibliography) W. Sears's and James V. Murfin's studies of the Maryland campaign or John M. Priest's work on South Mountain.

These problems are perhaps attributable to the author's failure to consult a full range of secondary sources related to the events in which Reno was involved. Neither Murfin's nor Priest's works appear in either the notes or the bibliography. Nor does it appear that McConnell knew of the existence of John Hennessy's outstanding 1993 work on the Second Manassas campaign. He also ignores information and analysis contained in William B. Skelton's study of the antebellum officer corps, John C. Waugh's study of the West Point class of 1846, and any number of recent works on Civil War mili-

tary history that could have been used to provide readers with a broader context for assessing and understanding Reno's career.

The author's repeated references to the existence of a special relationship between Reno and his fellow member of the famous West Point class of 1846, Stonewall Jackson, also comes across as a dubious effort to elevate the importance of his subject. McConnell fails to provide any primary source evidence to support his assertions that Reno and Jackson were friends. Indeed, the fact that Reno's name does not even appear in the index of Frank Vandiver's still-standard 1957 biography of Jackson suggests that no special relationship existed between the two men. McConnell also fails to support his assessments of Reno as a "brilliant officer" and "especially talented leader" (pp. x, 31). Although he makes

a convincing case that Reno demonstrated professional competence in carrying out the various duties entrusted to him in the course of his military career and that he had the respect of his men and fellow officers, there is little to suggest that any of his exploits were particularly spectacular or inspired.

With the exception of the accounts McConnell provides of Reno's prewar service and personal life, *Remember Reno* offers little new information on its subject or his place in American history. It is to be hoped, however, that McConnell's work indicates a rising interest in men such as Reno, William B. Franklin, Alpheus S. Williams, Gouverneur K. Warren, and others who faced the challenges associated with commanding a division, corps, and/or brigade in the Army of the Potomac. It is a field ripe for study.

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