H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Nathaniel Cheairs Jr.. Hughes. *Bentonville: The Final Battle of Sherman and Johnston.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. xix + 336 pp. $37.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2281-4.

Reviewed by Stephen D. Engle (Florida Atlantic University)
Published on H-CivWar (November, 1996)

In the historiography of the American Civil War that continues to emphasize battles and leaders, what could be more important than William T. Sherman's Atlanta campaign or his March to the Sea? Perhaps Sherman's March into the Carolinas is as important, although according to Nathaniel Cheairs Hughes, the battle of Bentonville "should not have been fought" (p. 222). Yet fought it was, for three days in mid-March 1865, between Sherman and Joseph E. Johnston. Sherman had grown exasperated with the kind of warfare that had forced him to follow John Bell Hood's army. Sherman wanted to ignore Hood and march through the heart of Georgia to Savannah, on the coast. This would put Sherman on the side of war that best agreed with him–the offensive side. And because no enemy would stand between him and Savannah, it would allow his army to destroy everything of military value, thus implementing his "total war" philosophy.

At the beginning of 1865, the only portions of the Confederate heartland still undisturbed by the Federals were the interior of the Carolinas and most of Alabama. The Union high command devised a strategy to deal with Alabama, though it proved only a sideshow to Sherman's march through South Carolina. On February 1 Sherman's 60,000 soldiers headed north on their second march of destruction, through South Carolina. This march had two strategic objectives: to destroy all Confederate war resources in Shermans's path and to come on Robert E. Lee's rear and help Ulysses S. Grant crush the Army of Northern Virginia. Sherman's soldiers had another purpose–to raze South Carolina.

Perhaps more important and more shocking than the destructive war of vengeance waged by Sherman's army were its amazing logistical achievements. Johnston was convinced that it was impossible for an army to march across the lower portions of South Carolina in winter. No wonder, then, that William Hardee declared that not since the days of Julius Caesar had there been such an army as Sherman's. Passing into North Carolina must have been a let-down to the rank-and-file soldier who had been punishing South Carolina, for North Carolinians would be treated differently. Whereas Sherman gave hell to the Palmetto state, moderation would prevail in the Tarheel state. Sherman was sensitive to the politics of war, particularly with regard to North Carolina. It was one of the last states to pass an ordinance of secession, and from the outbreak of the war, there had been a strong Unionist party in the state.

It was an outstanding army that Sherman led into North Carolina, with high spirits and exceptionally strong leadership. Johnston, who had returned to command in light of John Bell Hood's disaster at Nashville, could not boast of such advantages. With a force heavily outnumbered and demoralized, and led by officers who often held grievances against one another, the question that loomed over his army was, Did it lack the will to fight? Whatever the answer, according to Hughes, Johnston fought because he saw an opportunity, albeit a slim one, to seize the initiative from Sherman and injure his army.

Even though his strategic plan was no better than the condition of his troops, Johnston decided he would surprise a Federal force that believed it was in pursuit of a retreating army. After Henry Slocum's two corps encountered Hardee's troops near Averasboro on March 16, Slocum advanced toward Bentonville. Sherman was moving toward Goldsboro to link up with the forces of John Schofield and Alfred Terry, who were coming in from the coast. Johnston's 21,000 Confederates concentrated to defeat Slocum's wing. On the morning of the 19th, the leading division (Carlin's) of the 14th Corps encountered and drove back Wade Hampton's cavalry. Johnston then counterattacked. Slocum massed his forces and successfully withstood several desperate attacks as the Federals were pushed back. Johnston then withdrew to a position in front of Mill Creek, with his left flank protected by a swamp. Little fighting was done on the 20th, but late in the day, Sherman's entire force was in position to descend on Johnston. On the morning

of the 21st, the Federals attempted to move through the swamp and take Mill Creek bridge to cut off Johnston's retreat; but Johnston detected this maneuver, blocked it with his reserves, and held his position until nightfall, when he retreated toward Smithfield.

Bentonville was the last full-scale battle for the opposing armies of Sherman and Johnston. It represented a courageous but hopeless effort by the Confederates to delay the inevitable. Johnston tried, though unsuccessfully, to demonstrate to his men that a calculated offensive thrust, despite limited resources and objectives, could bring about important results. Although Hughes argues that Johnston should be credited with having achieved a surprise, he also reveals Johnston's shortcomings as a commander. The fact that he remained on the field in the face of a greatly superior enemy during March 20-21, "after a surprise had been lost appears to have been an unreasonable risk, totally uncharacteristic of him" (p. 223). Of course, Johnston alone could not be blamed for the defeat. Bragg was disruptive and Hardee was slow. Sherman, on the other hand, according to Hughes, kept his perspective by remaining committed to the larger goal of reaching Goldsboro, rather than stopping to pursue the defeated Confederates. Moreover, his subordinates performed well.

In the end, Bentonville represented the best the Confederacy could do to stop Sherman's march through Georgia and the Carolinas. Nathaniel Hughes is to be commended for providing a comprehensive tactical study of this important battle. He carefully lays out the movement of the Confederate and Union troops from South Carolina, across the state line to Fayetteville, and on to Goldsboro. He places the battle within the larger military framework of the last months of the war and addresses the fascinating question of why Johnston chose to fight when he knew that the war was lost.

Copyright (c) 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the list. For other permission, please contact <H-Net@h-net.msu.edu>. [The book review editor for H-CivWar is Daniel E. Sutherland <dsutherl@comp.uark.edu>.]

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Stephen D. Engle. Review of Hughes, Nathaniel Cheairs Jr.., *Bentonville: The Final Battle of Sherman and Johnston.* H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. November, 1996.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=659

Copyright © 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.