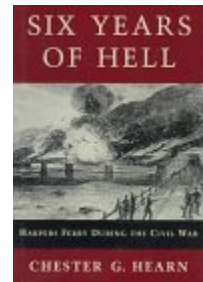


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Chester G. Hearn. *Six Years of Hell: Harpers Ferry during the Civil War*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996. xi + 319 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2090-3.

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Published on H-CivWar (February, 1997)



As most readers of American history already know, Harpers Ferry is eternally linked to the exploits of one person, John Brown. Although Brown's 1859 raid guaranteed immortality for Harpers Ferry, historians have too often focused only on that incident. In *Six Years of Hell: Harpers Ferry during the Civil War*, Chester Hearn attempts to broaden our knowledge and understanding of that acclaimed town by continuing its story to the end of the war.

What happened to the Ferry (as Hearn affectionately calls it) after Brown was captured and hanged? The town changed hands fourteen times during the Civil War and became an integral part of eastern military operations. Hearn writes of his fascination with how often Harpers Ferry "entered into the strategies of the Union and Confederate armies. Every battle fought in northern Virginia, Maryland, or Pennsylvania in some way involved the Ferry, and nobody suffered more than the civilians who lived there" (pp. xi-xii). The resourceful inhabitants of the Ferry became accustomed to this chaos, and some citizens even "survived by baking bread and pies for whatever side occupied the town over the next four years" (p. 58).

Hearn begins with a detailed description of John Brown's activities. The author introduces Brown's compatriots and examines what Brown hoped to achieve by attacking the Ferry. It is in these chapters that Hearn offers his most vivid characterization of the town itself. He presents maps and describes the homes, people, public gathering places, and factories in the Ferry. The hatreds and animosities that would soon consume the nation were present in the Ferry in 1859. Hearn depicts, often in chilling detail, the fate of Brown's associates as their plans collapsed. One of Brown's African American

accomplices, Dangerfield Newby, was shot by the townspeople who then "cut off his genitals, slit his throat, and rammed sticks in his wounds" (p. 22). Hearn argues that Brown's assault also incited emotions that soon led to violence among the people of the Ferry. Situated so close to the Mason-Dixon line, the Ferry had substantial numbers of Union and rebel sympathizers. "If a person had a grievance against a neighbor," explains Hearn, "a few words of vilification spoken to a receptive officer landed the accused in a dirty guardhouse" (pp. 58-59).

The body of this book concerns the Ferry's strategic position in the battles of the Virginia theatre of war. Several factors made the Ferry a critical military locale. The Baltimore and Ohio railroad passed through the Ferry connecting Baltimore, Washington, and Wheeling to the Shenandoah Valley and its abundant grain supplies. The railroad also brought tons of coal and thousands of passengers through Harpers Ferry. The Baltimore and Ohio bridge, which linked the Ferry to the railroad line, was destroyed so many times during the war that Ferry residents soon lost count. Also of key importance was the U.S. Armory, which by 1860 produced over 15,000 rifled muskets for the army. Hearn notes that "no arms producer south of the Mason-Dixon Line could match the output of the Harper's Ferry armories" (p. 5).

Because the fighting in northern Virginia centered around the Ferry, commanders in both Union and Confederate camps determined its military fortunes. Union forces held the Ferry for most of the war, but its location made it hard to defend. Hearn suggests that even John Brown learned something quickly when he occupied Harpers Ferry; it was "easy to attack but almost impossible to defend" (p. 23). Surrounded by heights, the Ferry rested deep in a valley, making it easy for oppos-

ing armies to occupy that high ground and assault the town. The South, on the other hand, often used the Ferry as a diversionary target while advancing toward other battle sites. In the spring of 1861, Robert E. Lee ordered Stonewall Jackson to evacuate the Ferry rather than be trapped by Union forces. Jackson and Joseph E. Johnston destroyed the town and departed, leaving little for occupying Union forces.

Hearn beautifully demonstrates the Ferry's military significance by showing how close it was to the critical battles of the war. To get to Antietam, Manassas, and Gettysburg, troops and armies had to pass through or circumvent the Ferry. Harpers Ferry was central to the military history of the Civil War and critical to the decisions made by the leading military figures. Even the reader who is not interested in the minutia of battles and day-to-day military ventures will appreciate the importance and significance of Harpers Ferry. Though most of this book's military particulars have been written about before, Hearn's primary goal is to present the Virginia campaign with Harpers Ferry and its citizens at the vital center.

A reader of *Six Years of Hell* might want to know more, however, about the day-to-day lives of the people of the Ferry. Hearn writes in general about these

issues but does not offer enough details. He tantalizes us with spies, whisky smugglers, and prostitutes taking over houses behind fleeing citizens. A more comprehensive and specific discussion of these activities might have added richness to this story. While the leaders were planning strategy around Harpers Ferry, what was going on in the town? Hearn's depiction of military tactics overwhelms his efforts to evaluate the social life of the Ferry during the war.

Nevertheless, Hearn has written a fine book about a critically important town. His story is supported by meticulous research. Hearn makes superb use of letters and diaries of the many Union and Confederate soldiers who occupied the Ferry during the sectional conflict. After reading *Six Years of Hell*, Civil War enthusiasts will no longer think only of John Brown when Harpers Ferry is mentioned. Hearn has made the Ferry a much more important and vital town in the history of the American Civil War.

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**Citation:** David E. Woodard. Review of Hearn, Chester G., *Six Years of Hell: Harpers Ferry during the Civil War*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. February, 1997.

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