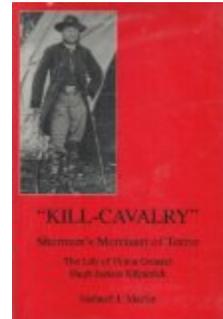


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Samuel J. Martin. *"Kill-Cavalry": Sherman's Merchant of Terror. The Life of Union General Hugh Judson Kilpatrick*. Madison, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996. 325 pp. \$48.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8386-3665-7.

Reviewed by Gregory J. W. Urwin (Department of History, University of Central Arkansas)
Published on H-CivWar (February, 1997)



The life of Union cavalry general Hugh Judson Kilpatrick reads like something dreamed up by a hack novelist. Kilpatrick fit the very definition of a stage villain. Driven by an ambition that outstripped his modest abilities, he let nothing stand in the way of getting what he wanted. He would flatter any superior, mislead any reporter, betray any friend or patron, tell any lie, and slaughter innumerable subordinates to gain favorable notice and promotion. His sexual appetite was as insatiable as his thirst for power. Twice married, he went through mistresses and prostitutes like they were junk food and made no effort to conceal his affairs. Kilpatrick was even jailed for several months in late 1862 for soliciting bribes and illegally selling confiscated property. Yet, despite all these flaws, Kilpatrick rose to command a cavalry division in the Army of the Potomac in 1863 and later filled the same role in Sherman's campaigns in Georgia and the Carolinas. He may have been a bounder, but he was also a remarkable man.

Born in New Jersey in 1836, Kilpatrick entered the United States Military Academy in 1856, graduating as class valedictorian in May 1861, just weeks after the outbreak of the Civil War. Instead of settling for a second lieutenant's slot in a regular artillery battery, Kilpatrick put his career on the fast track by securing a captaincy in a glamorous volunteer regiment, the 5th New York Infantry (better known as "Duryee's Zouaves"). To his friends, he predicted that if he survived the conflict, he would convert the brilliant military reputation he intended to earn into political capital and get himself elected governor of New Jersey and then president of the United States.

When a shell fragment struck Kilpatrick in the left

buttock in a skirmish at Big Bethel on June 10, 1861, northern newspapers hailed him as the first Union officer wounded in action. The restless West Pointer traded on his notoriety to wrangle an appointment as lieutenant colonel in the 2nd New York Cavalry. With that breakthrough, Kilpatrick's star rose rapidly. In early 1863 he took command of his own brigade in the Army of the Potomac's newly organized and increasingly potent Cavalry Corps. By June 14, 1863, he was a brigadier general. Two weeks later, he received control of his corps's 3rd Cavalry Division. He led that unit through the Gettysburg campaign as well as the indecisive fall skirmishing that occurred as the Army of the Potomac cautiously followed Robert E. Lee's battered legions back into northern Virginia.

Kilpatrick cut a conspicuous figure in some of the largest cavalry fights in the eastern theater, but his record was checkered with both successes and failures. As a tactician, Kilpatrick embodied utter recklessness, and he sent so many of his own men to their doom that the survivors called him "Kill-Cavalry." He was soon eclipsed by his youngest brigade commander, George Armstrong Custer—an officer whose daredevil courage and sounder tactical instincts made him the darling of the Cavalry Corps and a favorite of Major General George Gordon Meade. Desperate for attention, Kilpatrick went over his superiors' heads to enlist President Abraham Lincoln's support for an ill-conceived and ill-executed raid to rescue Union prisoners confined at Richmond, Virginia.

The failure of Kilpatrick's Richmond raid made its originator *persona non grata* in the Army of the Potomac, so he transferred to the western theater to lead a cavalry division in Major General William T. Sherman's drive on

Atlanta. A wound at Resaca sidelined Kilpatrick for a while, but he returned in time to serve as Sherman's chief of cavalry on the "March to the Sea." Kilpatrick delighted in destroying southern property, but his preoccupation with sex was almost his undoing. Twice Confederate cavalry managed to surprise his camp while he was in bed with prostitutes, and he was forced to flee for his life in something less than full uniform.

With the war's end, Kilpatrick found himself a brevet major general in both the regular and volunteer service, but he was not a big enough hero to win political office—even though he repeatedly changed his political allegiance whenever he felt the prevailing wind change. In the end, he settled for two non-concurrent appointments as ambassador to Chile, where he died of Bright's disease on December 2, 1881. In forty-six years, he involved himself in more trouble, adventure, and controversy than most men twice his age.

Samuel J. Martin's *"Kill-Cavalry"* is the first full-length biography of Kilpatrick to see print. Martin is a freelance writer who has published several articles in popular magazines. He calls his book the "biography of an antihero" whose "exploits were more often contemptible than commendable" (p. 12). In Kilpatrick's case, that is not hard to prove, but Martin should have set his sights higher. In addition to being such a colorful character, Kilpatrick led a life that could serve as a useful prism for analyzing the rise of the Union cavalry, intrigue among high-ranking officers in the Union army, and American politics and diplomacy during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age. Unfortunately, *"Kill-Cavalry"* never rises above a pedestrian level and fails to develop these broader themes. It also fails to do justice to Kilpatrick himself.

The main fault with this book lies in Martin's lack

of thorough research. He relies too much on printed sources, many of them secondary works more popular than scholarly. True, Kilpatrick's personal papers were destroyed, but many of his superiors, peers, subordinates, and Confederate foes left letters and diaries that are housed at repositories across the nation. Martin's bibliography contains many glaring omissions, such as the published letters of Colonel Theodore Lyman of General Meade's staff, the various autobiographical books of Willard W. Glazier (a Union cavalry officer captured as a result of Kilpatrick's folly), Henry C. Meyer's *Civil War Experiences under Bayard, Gregg, Kilpatrick, Custer*, and John Edward Pierce's excellent 1983 doctoral dissertation, "General Hugh Judson Kilpatrick in the American Civil War: A New Appraisal." Martin demonstrates his unfamiliarity with the literature still further by listing secondary sources as primary works and vice versa. Poor homework led him into marring his book with several needless factual errors and questionable judgments.

In Martin's view, Kilpatrick was not only a braggart, a libertine, a profiteer, and an opportunist, but also a coward who avoided exposing himself in battle. This interpretation clashes with recent specialized studies by Edward G. Longacre and the late Stephen Z. Starr, who held that Kilpatrick's physical courage matched his impetuosity. As Martin's scholarship does not equal that of Longacre and Starr, their conclusions seem more credible and historians should concede to Kilpatrick, at least that one redeeming virtue.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and 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 network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

Citation: Gregory J. W. Urwin. Review of Martin, Samuel J., *"Kill-Cavalry": Sherman's Merchant of Terror. The Life of Union General Hugh Judson Kilpatrick*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. February, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=843>

Copyright © 1997 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.