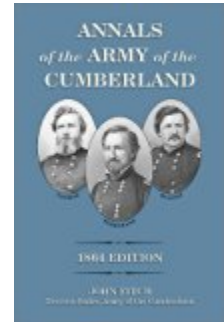


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Fitch. *Annals of the Army of the Cumberland*. Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2003. iv + 726 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8117-2627-6.

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## A Picture of Our Army

This re-issued volume is intriguing on a number of levels. Originally released in the fall of 1863, the author, who served as the Provost Judge of the Army of the Cumberland, announced in the preface its triple goals: to “afford pleasure to our soldiers,” to impart information to the people, and lastly, if the work proved profitable, to generate funds for the erection of a suitable monument on the Stones River battlefield. Indeed, one of the illustrations in the frontispiece shows an “artist’s conception” of such a monument on the field, which bears an uncanny resemblance to the one eventually erected in 1906 by the Nashville, Chattanooga and St. Louis Railway. The author did note that if the monument “scheme,” to use his term, should prove impractical, the funds would be utilized in some other charitable Union cause. As the book went through five printings in its original wartime run, it was presumably profitable enough. The fate of this monument project remains a mystery. A whiff of scandal is evident, however, as Fitch apparently withheld his name as author in its first three editions. He finally stepped forward in the fourth, stating his original intent was solely “to do good.” Curiously, no mention is made of another memorial, built in the spring of 1863 by men of Brigadier-General William B. Hazen’s brigade, which was already on the battlefield at the time of publication.

Fitch’s ultimate monument to the Army of the Cumberland, his *Annals*, is certainly a remarkable work, with much to recommend to a variety of readers. In many ways, it oddly approximates the sort of unit history and souvenir book more commonly encountered from the postwar era, balanced with the needs of a Northern war-

time audience. It contains detailed biographies of the commanding general, Major-General William S. Rosecrans; the army chief-of staff, Brigadier-General James A. Garfield; and all the prominent commanders in the army. Information regarding lesser commanders and staff officers is also present, though with less depth. Four officers killed at Stones River are also noted, among them Brigadier-General Joshua Sill, whose specialty was ordnance (and for whom the present-day U.S. Army Field Artillery school is named); and Colonel Julius Garesche, most widely remembered today for failing to dodge an incoming shell in the presence of General Rosecrans on the morning of December 31.

As one might expect, these literary cameos are all burnished brightly with the zeal of patriotic purity. For example, the notation regarding Brigadier-General Jefferson C. Davis describes his murder of Major-General “Bull” Nelson in the Galt House in Louisville as an “unfortunate personal difficulty ... which resulted in the death of the latter and led to the arrest of General Davis.” Given the original date of publication, this sort of commentary is an interesting window to the times.

In addition to the biographies, Fitch also provides much general information about the Army of the Cumberland that is of use to students of the modern era. The official reports of the Union and Confederate commanders from the Battle of Stones River are present, as well as General Rosecrans’s report of the Chickamauga fight. The various non-combat departments, ranging from the army mail to the quartermaster and commissary, are cov-

ered as well, highlighting the important role each department occupied in the grand design of the army. While this is not unusual in books of this sort, a few things make this particular work distinctive. The most obvious of these, of course, is that it is a *western* book. Voices from the western theater have traditionally been somewhat underrepresented on the Civil War bookshelf. Lacking the luster of a Lee to defeat, some aspects of the campaign in Tennessee went on “below the fold,” irrespective of their strategic importance. Fitch observes, “Had the Army of the Cumberland stormed the ramparts of Tullahoma, spiked its seventy pieces of cannon, and driven back its rebel defenders at the cost of ten thousand men, the victory would have been chronicled in story and song. But to win victory at the least cost has ever been the study of General Rosecrans” (pp. 455-456).

The author devotes approximately 125 pages to a narrative of the military operations of the Federal force that became the Army of the Cumberland, beginning with formative activity during the summer of 1861 in Kentucky. Although all the noteworthy events receive some attention in this section, General Don Carlos Buell’s tenure and the Kentucky campaign are given noticeably short shrift. Upon the arrival of General Rosecrans, the bulk of the detail (later skirmishes and battles, the sweep across Middle Tennessee, even Colonel John T. Wilder’s introduction of his “exhaustless weapons—the Spencer Rifles”) is presented more freely. In the section on the Battle of Chickamauga, however, the tone grows somewhat defensive. Closing with some choice commentary regarding the wisdom of replacing Rosecrans following the battle, Fitch even quotes from the Richmond *Examiner* to underscore his point: “Meanwhile, Lincoln is helping us ... We may however mention, in proof of his [Rosecrans’s] intellectual ability, that he graduated fifth in his class at West Point in a class of fifty-six, and Longstreet fifty-fourth” (p. 481).

But an army is not all battles, nor does it exist in a vacuum. There is a section of some 161 pages focused on the work of the Army Police, which Provost Judge Fitch drew from copious files to present an instructive record and an entertaining review of occupied Rebel-dom, as seen through Federal eyes. Of particular interest is the portion containing segments of “Racy Rebel Letters.” Being a good cataloguer of events, and gifted with a slicing wit, Fitch notes that his work would be incomplete if it did not possess examples of the “bitter, shrewd, wild, reckless women of the South.” He states unashamedly that this material was acquired with the “full sympathy” of those who spent time dampening the

gum and surreptitiously opening, reading and resealing many envelopes, before passing them on to their *secesh* recipients. Other provost stories in “Spies, Smugglers and Rebel Emissaries,” along with the all too short “Incidents and Reminiscences,” gives the work a good, solid human interest component. Anyone familiar with the “Bragg’s got no army!” story found in Sam Watkins’s *Co. Aytch* will see what is possibly the first printed version of it here (p. 653). Perhaps one of the more interesting of these stories, however, is “A Soldier’s Armistice,” sketching out a pause between Union and Confederate pickets prior to the Battle of Stones River. This vignette closed with the observation, “so we met and parted, not realizing that we were enemies” (p. 662).

Given the work’s original mid-war publication date, the above statement at first glance appears unusual. However, it is interesting to note how Fitch’s sentiments merely precede those held by other authors or veterans of both sides, who wrote of the war in later years. Often, their basic beliefs followed the author’s side (whether it won or lost), fighting on the side of unquestioned right. Veterans of the opposing side, however, were usually considered worthy of their adversary’s respect, “on strictly a soldierly level,” for they possessed the moral courage to answer their country’s call and face the unspeakable horrors of the battleground in its defense. Politically, of course, some were still wrong. In this genre, the worst contempt was generally reserved for the enemy civilians, who were behind the continued agitation of regular forces. Fitch notes several instances of suppressing Rebel sympathizers encountered by the Army of the Cumberland, and details their fate.

A surprise for some modern readers is to be found in the account “Gathering in the Contrabands” (pp. 651-52), detailing the impressments of African Americans in Nashville as forced labor. Here Fitch records a raid on a black church in semi-comical terms, describing a band of panicky churchgoers attempting to flee impressment (and exploitation) by bands of Federal soldiers. Once secured, however, they do a fine job building Ft. Negley and other defenses around the city. They cut stone, cart earth, and haul rock. Fitch remarks, “They perform[ed] their work cheerfully and zealously, and without any pay, except their daily rations and perhaps some clothing” (p. 664). Curiously, however, the woodcut depicting the “cheerful workforce” does not support this image. Instead, the actions of some of the Union troops depicted in the illustration merely suggest, “for the moment,” a change in overseers. “Gathering in the Contrabands” is a vignette on the complex nature of the racial history of

the era.

In the fall of 1863, when this work was originally published, there were soldiers of the Army of the Cumberland in need of a morale boost and a fund-raising device

to help form a monument. While both of these causes are now past, Fitch's third stated reason for the work, imparting knowledge to the people, is as appropriate now as it was then.

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