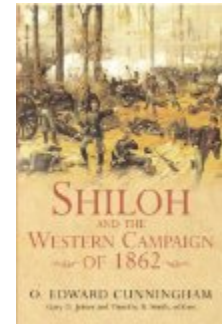


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O. Edward Cunningham. *Shiloh and the Western Campaign of 1862*. Joiner and Timothy B. Smith. New York: Savas Beatie, 2007. xxx + 476 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-932714-27-2.

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Published on H-CivWar (July, 2008)



A Traditional, Yet Fresh Look at the Shiloh Campaign

Over the past two decades, studies of Civil War military operations have come to encompass more than the battlefield itself. Academic publishing houses attempt with increasing frequency to broaden contextual understanding of campaigns and combat, no longer limiting their purview to leadership variables, tactical and operational decisions, or the strategic consequences of victory and defeat. Mirroring long-standing trends in the military historical field at large, campaign volumes now routinely investigate such topics as soldier motivation, the effects of battle upon the American rank and file, and the social cost of war upon home front populations and those communities that had the distinction of witnessing the struggle's indelible tragedies first hand.[1]

Transformations in academic titles notwithstanding, commercial publishers—whose offerings necessarily seek a wider readership—continue to emphasize the “drums and trumpets” approach to Civil War history. The popularity of the battle and campaign genre is wholly undeniable, as even a cursory glance at the shelves of one's local Barnes & Noble bookstore suggests. Such traditional methods have drawn criticism from academics for some time as being redundant in a field fairly saturated with literature; nevertheless, important and enduring “battle books” appear with a welcome regularity. Not alone among publishers that present conventional military research as a cornerstone of their catalogs, Savas Beatie has in its five-year existence established a notable reputation for producing exceptionally worthy volumes. This trend continues with O. Edward Cunningham's path-breaking *Shiloh and the Western Campaign of 1862*, a work origi-

nally penned over forty years ago. With its printing, only now will it receive the recognition it assuredly deserves.

In their fine introduction, editors Gary D. Joiner and Timothy B. Smith argue convincingly for the utility of Cunningham's study. As specialists in the Civil War's western campaigns, Joiner and Smith recognize the value of the manuscript. A Louisiana State University doctoral dissertation completed in 1966 under the direction of legendary Civil War scholar T. Harry Williams, Cunningham's work provided a trove of information for a small coterie of ranger/historians and researchers at the Shiloh National Military Park who consulted a worn copy of the manuscript located there. In setting *Shiloh's* historiographical context, the editors note that volumes printed before 1966 tended to emphasize the famed “Hornet's Nest” as *Shiloh's* nexus, while important offerings published during the 1960s and 70s ignored his manuscript completely, either perpetuating the dominant “Hornet's Nest School” or focusing upon the death of General Albert Sidney Johnston, commander of the Confederate Army of the Mississippi, as the contest's critical moment. Cunningham—who passed away ten years before his book's publication—pored over an impressive array of primary and secondary materials to arrive at some distinctively different conclusions.[2]

Shiloh and the Western Campaign of 1862 adheres to what has long been the standard campaign study format. After ably setting the wider strategic and operational setting in the months before April 1862 and introducing the campaign's principal players, the author

devotes eleven chapters to the Confederate and Union concentration near Shiloh Church and the battle itself. His is a straightforward, narrative approach to history—not uncommon to dissertations of the era—with little in the way of comprehensive analysis. Indeed, the author’s major disagreements with Shiloh orthodoxy are implied rather than overt; nevertheless, they reveal significant divergence from customary battle lore.

Foremost among Cunningham’s claims is that the Hornet’s Nest, though undoubtedly a stirring event in the two-day struggle along the banks of the Tennessee River, did not represent the most significant action during the bloody Sunday of April 6. Instead, the author avers, it was the Federal defense of the Hamburg-Purdy/Corinth-Pittsburg crossroads—located just west of the Hornet’s Nest—that figured more prominently in the development of the battle. Here over fourteen brigades clashed in a fearful, hour-long firefight and melee. Finally compelled to yield “the Crossroads” near noon, Union generals William Tecumseh Sherman and John Alexander McClernand subsequently executed a slashing counter-attack to regain the position, only to be forced back again by elements of four Confederate corps. Though less remembered than the storied Hornet’s Nest, the actions at the Crossroads represented a crucial phase in the contest. The mass of combat power expended there, coupled with disorganization after hours of intense fighting, prevented the Confederate high command from exploiting the Federal retreat and seizing the all-important Pittsburg Landing on the Tennessee. Had it been successful in taking these objectives, the Army of the Mississippi not only would have administered a more decisive defeat to General Ulysses Simpson Grant’s Army of the Tennessee, but also might have prevented the timely junction on April 6-7 between the latter and its support forces, General Don Carlos Buell’s Army of the Ohio.

By no means does the Hornet’s Nest—or associated areas such as the “Sunken Road,” “Peach Orchard,” and “Bloody Pond”—receive scant attention in Cunningham’s narrative. The author, however, was the first to correctly question the long-held notion that the so-called Sunken Road created the conditions enabling the stout Federal defense within the Hornet’s Nest. Instead, Cunningham finds that the dense thickets in front of the road itself (which was hardly as sunken as some postwar accounts suggest), coupled with open fields of fire emanating from each of the position’s flanks, mitigated Confederate success in assaulting what became a Union stronghold at Shiloh. And Southern attackers, realizing its seeming impregnability, assailed the Hornet’s Nest position far

fewer times—eight at the very most—than standard studies of the battle had led scholars and enthusiasts to believe. Indeed, the impenetrable nature of the Nest led Confederate attackers to seek opportunity elsewhere—most notably at the aforementioned “Crossroads,” but also along the rough, wooded ravines located hard by the Tennessee. By late afternoon, Benjamin Mayberry Prentiss’s Yankee defenders, completely overcome by events on both their left and right, surrendered the Hornet’s Nest to their Confederate foes in what was a dramatic, if perhaps overrated, Shiloh episode.

Cunningham’s findings, backed as they are by prodigious research, have spawned a recent “revisionist” movement within Shiloh literature; the published books and articles of Smith, Shiloh Chief Ranger Stacy D. Allen, and others incorporate elements of the author’s original thesis in their modern retelling of the campaign.[3] As the progenitor of an emergent school of thought, the publication of *Shiloh and the Western Campaign of 1862* certainly is past due. There are a few weaknesses, however, that detract somewhat from its general effectiveness and ultimately prevent it from gaining definitive status among Shiloh volumes. Above all, Cunningham’s narrative style is at times formulaic and repetitive, reflecting the unseasoned approach of a young writer. Moreover—as mentioned above—the author neglects at times adequately to discuss or analyze the consequences of Confederate and Federal command decisions both during and after the contest. Instead, he offers a series of brief “what if” questions at the conclusion of chapter 15 to suggest critical points of contingency. Last, the modern maps fail to identify the maze of roads, paths, and streams that feature so prominently at Shiloh, sometimes confusing the reader as s/he wades through the regimental-level discussions that make up the bulk of the account. Despite these criticisms, the work of the late O. Edward Cunningham should find a place on the bookshelves of the serious Civil War military devotee, not only as a work of history, but also as an important piece illustrating the development of Shiloh historiography.

Notes

[1]. For examples of this growing trend within Civil War military historiography, consult the ten titles (to date) comprising the University of Nebraska Press’s Great Campaigns of the Civil War series; also notably conspicuous in this genre is George C. Rable, *Fredericksburg! Fredericksburg!* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

[2]. Works emphasizing the Hornet’s Nest as the bat-

tle's focal point are David W. Reed, *The Battle of Shiloh and the Organizations Engaged* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1902); Albert Dillahunt, *Shiloh National Military Park, Tennessee* (Washington, DC: National Park Service, 1955); and James Lee McDonough, *Shiloh: In Hell Before Night* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1977). Those studies that point to Johnston's death as the decisive moment at Shiloh include Wiley Sword, *Shiloh: Bloody April* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1974); and Charles P. Roland, *Albert Sidney Johnston: Soldier of Three Republics* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964).

[3]. Timothy B. Smith, *This Great Battlefield of Shiloh: History, Memory, and the Establishment of a Civil War National Military Park* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2004); Smith, *The Untold Story of Shiloh: The Battle and Battlefield* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006); Stacy D. Allen, "Shiloh!: The Campaign and First Day's Battle," *Blue and Gray* 14, no. 3 (1997); Allen, "Shiloh!: The Second Day's Battle and Aftermath," *Blue and Gray* 14, no. 4 (1997); and Larry J. Daniel, *Shiloh: The Battle That Changed the Civil War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).

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Citation: Christopher S. Stowe. Review of Cunningham, O. Edward, *Shiloh and the Western Campaign of 1862*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. July, 2008.

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