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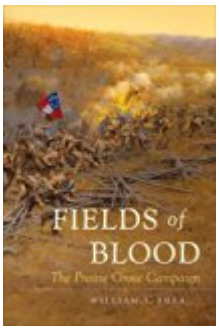
William L. Shea. *Fields of Blood: The Prairie Grove Campaign.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. x + 358 pp. $35.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8078-6602-3.



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Commissioned by Matthew E. Mason (Brigham Young University)

William Shea's solid study of the Confederacy's last significant offensive operation in the vast trans-Mississippi makes a fine argument that Prairie Grove, Arkansas (December 7, 1862) may be the most consequential battle you have never heard of. As a contest of combat, it does not lack for drama despite its diminutive scope. If analytically conjoined with operations in Maryland and Kentucky, it enhances the argument that the autumn of 1862 was a concentrated period of bold but failed Confederate offensives. At the same time it refutes the layman's notion that after Pea Ridge the Confederacy was finished in the Ozarks. An established Civil War scholar, Shea has enlarged his repertoire and produced the first analytically significant study of the five-month-long Prairie Grove campaign. The final product represents a yeoman's effort of exhaustive investigation that illuminates all aspects of this underappreciated Civil War contest.

The narrative center of Shea's work is embodied in the person of General Thomas Hindman. The eventual Prairie Grove campaign begins and ends with Hindman. An outspoken U.S. congressman from Arkansas and enthusiastic secessionist, Hindman distinguished himself as a brigade commander at Shiloh. He returned to defend his home state the following month in the wake of a largely unauthorized withdrawal of Confederate resources by Earl Van Dorn after his defeat at Pea Ridge. As Union forces under Samuel Curtis moved unopposed into the Arkansas Delta, Hindman thrust martial law upon the state's inhabitants and sent secret envoys into Missouri's "Little Dixie" to stir the coals of secessionism. Simultaneously, as his lines of communication eroded, Curtis was redirected to Helena, Arkansas and the Union line of supply afforded by the Mississippi River. Thus, despite significant Confederate losses since Pea Ridge, Hindman discovered that the Union possessed no more than a toehold on Arkansas. Meanwhile his "Missouri diplomacy" was a catalyst for widespread guerrilla activity to the north and a stream of recruits to the south. As long as the Ozark Plateau remained open, a counteroffensive into southwestern Missouri was vi-

able. Here, the author offers his most lavish praise for Hindman's greatest strategic attribute: logistical ingenuity. In a little over two months, he assembled and supplied a patchwork force capable of threatening Missouri. According to Shea, "it was an achievement without parallel in the Civil War" (p. 7). In any other theater this would ring hyperbolic but not in the trans-Mississippi (where, ironically, it was also the only place such a dramatic impact was possible by a solitary commander). At the same time, the author reveals that the seed of the campaign's ultimate defeat was planted in Hindman's own mind. He privately doubted his ability to command an entire army in combat. Such honest introspection ultimately proved insightful.

In a secondary but equally compelling focus, Shea also centers on Union commanders in the Army of the Frontier (comprised of the Kansas and two Missouri divisions) and recreates an intricate web of often prickly personalities. As commander of the District of Missouri, General John Schofield was the most prickly of these. He exerted considerable influence over events leading up to Prairie Grove; none over the actual battle; and decisive influence over its historic interpretation (mostly by blaming his subordinates). According to Shea, Schofield was too often driven by the selfish promotion of his own career. He usually looked at subordinates as potential threats from below and just as often viewed his superiors as obstacles blocking his climb to the top. After directing the campaign's inconclusive troop movements throughout the autumn, an attack of fever forced Schofield to convalesce in St. Louis in late November. Convinced that Hindman posed little threat to Missouri, Schofield removed himself from immediate action and placed the appropriately named James Blunt in command. Both in appearance and in persona, contemporaries conceded that General Blunt was the embodiment of his name. A Kansas abolitionist who relished leading his men into combat, Blunt was the foil to Hindman's invasion. Lastly, General Francis Herron is arguably the most affable of primary characters afforded extra attention by Shea. An Iowa banker, Herron had already earned the Medal of Honor at Pea Ridge and jointly led both Missouri divisions to the battlefield at Prairie Grove--in the nick of time, as it turned out.

Shea allocates one-third of his study to the deadly game of hide and seek played by both armies starting in September, but an early Confederate concession yielded the only real chance to fight on Northern ground. Advancing eighty-five miles north of Fort Smith, Hindman entertained threatening Springfield. However, events in the rear derailed his momentum. Since August, General Theophilus "Granny" Holmes had commanded the Trans-Mississippi Department from Little Rock. Tentatively in favor of Hindman's risky offensive, Holmes lost his nerve when General Allison Nelson suddenly died of fever and no other replacement existed to monitor men and material back in the Arkansas River Valley. Holmes suddenly ordered Hindman to return to Little Rock. This was a puzzling, yet critical, command decision and Shea offers only a minimal analysis. On the other hand, Holmes's decision defies easy explanation. Thus Hindman lost his chance to rally Missouri's rebels and fight on that state's ground.

With Hindman back in Little Rock, the invading force was incompetently led by General Raines as the initiative shifted entirely to the Union's counteroffensive. Raines was badly outmaneuvered and retreated back into Arkansas. Hoping to regain the initiative before Hindman returned, Raines divided his force. He sent Colonel Cooper's division (including Confederate Indians) to Indian Territory with the brash intent of destroying Blunt's supply base in Fort Scott, Kansas. However, Schofield separated his divisions as well and Blunt routed Cooper in a twenty-one-minute skirmish which left the Union in control of a large portion of Indian Territory. Simultaneously, the two Missouri divisions pushed both

Rains and Hindman (back from Little Rock as of mid October) farther into Arkansas. Failing to hold the key roads that led to the mountainous terrain on the north side of the Arkansas River Valley, Hindman retreated to the safety of the valley itself on October 29. In a foreshadowing moment of clarity, Hindman reported back to Holmes that it seemed as if the Federals usually moved "more rapidly than I had anticipated" (p. 59).

In the remaining two-thirds of the narrative, Shea explores the interlocking sequence of decisions which culminated in the eventual battle and its aftermath. In this regard, four tactical deployments emerge as the most consequential. First, Shea adroitly concludes that Hindman's decision to maintain the foraging activities of General Marmaduke's cavalry at Cane Hill southwest of Fayetteville, despite aggressive pressure from Blunt, convinced the Union command that a new offensive was forthcoming on November 7. Simultaneously, the two Missouri divisions already marching toward Cape Girardeau were ordered to return and take a position near Springfield. Hindman was actually weeks from resuming the offensive but, once he did, the Missouri divisions would now be in place. Secondly, Blunt's resolve to remain alone near Cane Hill (thirty-five miles from Hindman but a hundred miles from the Missouri divisions) was an irresistible enticement for Hindman to envelop the outnumbered Kansas division. However, once Hindman moved toward Blunt he was motivated by the belief that he possessed surprise and superiority of numbers. Shea accurately demonstrates that Hindman generally lacked the proper urgency as he moved closer to Blunt. This only reiterates the importance of Blunt's strategic equipoise (or recklessness) as he doggedly held his isolated position. Next, Shea allocates appropriate credit to General Herron's forced march--one of the greatest executed by either side in the war. After Blunt understood approximately where Hindman intended to strike, he telegraphed for the support of the Missouri divisions. Under the direction of Herron they covered 120 miles of Ozark terrain in three-and-a-half days. This compelled Hindman to change his original plan as it placed him between two armies rather than on the flank of one. Curiously, Blunt never entertained closing the gap between himself and Herron and this immobility baffled his contemporaries. Using Occam's Razor the best explanation is that Blunt wanted a fight so he awaited its arrival. Finally, as the first part of the actual battle played out on the wooded slopes and fields of Prairie Grove, Blunt realized that Herron had engaged Hindman first and he quickly moved against Hindman's flank and participated in the second part of the battle. Thus Herron "saved" Blunt so Blunt could "save" Herron.

Shea carefully reconstructs the day-long battle with great care. In many respects Prairie Grove is a familiar template of opportunities seized and squandered. Having lost surprise, Hindman took up a defensive position and hoped Herron would attack so he could crush the Union relief and then Blunt. After his fabulous march, Herron inexpertly deployed his weary men with inconclusive results. Meanwhile Hindman established his headquarters and entrusted victory or defeat to his division and brigade commanders. However, often acting independently of one another as they parried the Union forces closest to them, they produced neither. Later in the afternoon, Blunt finally arrived on Hindman's flank. A stalled Union thrust followed by a frenetic Confederate counterthrust and the fading December light abruptly concluded the contest. Despite holding relatively strong ground, Hindman was also low on ammunition and he slipped away instead of renewing the fight. A rare truce was arranged to gather the wounded but afterwards Blunt was too worn down to press the retreating Confederates. Three weeks later the campaign ended with a smashing Union raid into Fort Smith and the complete disruption of Hindman's supply. The door to future Confederate invasions through the Ozark Plateau was slammed shut.

Shea has produced a compelling narrative of a campaign that has never received its full due. He began with a remarkable claim that a Confederate victory would have altered the course of the war in the trans-Mississippi. While this is plausible, it was not conclusively proven nor did it appear to be the author's primary concern. On the other hand, Shea's argument that (post Prairie Grove) the Confederacy would maintain little more than a defensive posture in the trans-Mississippi for the rest of the war seems well founded. On the whole, Shea is neither excessively analytical nor inadvertently noncommittal. To his credit, he allows the participants a free hand to critique the campaign for themselves. However, his criticism of Schofield's petty politics seems to be a pointed rebuke to Donald Connelly's recent biography which presented the general as an "astute political soldier."[1] By contrast, there is perhaps an occasional twinge of empathy for Hindman but this is easily explained by Hindman's vital narrative role--without his logistical acumen and daring offensive there would be nothing to write about. This is a sound and thorough study. It should stand as the benchmark work on Prairie Grove for at least the next generation.

Note

[1]. See Donald Connelly, ***John M. Schofield and the Politics of Generalship*** (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 11.

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