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**Earl J. Hess**. *Kennesaw Mountain: Sherman, Johnston, and the Atlanta Campaign.* Civil War America Series. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013. xvi + 322 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4696-0211-0.

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**Sherman's Failed Experiment**

The Atlanta campaign of 1864 was pivotal to the Union's efforts to secure the Confederate heartland. It also contributed immensely to Abraham Lincoln's reelection bid in November of 1864. The capture of Atlanta helped ensure that the United States would not abandon its efforts to prosecute the American Civil War to a victorious conclusion. Despite the campaign's importance, however, it has not enjoyed the same level of historical attention as other Civil War campaigns, particularly those in the Virginia theater of operations. Nevertheless, several important studies of the Atlanta campaign dominate the historiography of the Civil War in the West, particularly William R. Scaife's outstanding (and out-of-print) *The Campaign for Atlanta* (1993) and Albert E. Castel's *Decision in the West: The Atlanta Campaign of 1864* (1992). Still, detailed battle studies of individual engagements within the Atlanta campaign are strikingly scarce.

Thankfully, this trend has changed in recent years, and Earl J. Hess's *Kennesaw Mountain: Sherman, Johnston, and the Atlanta Campaign* is not only an outstanding study of one of the most important battles of the Atlanta campaign, but also among the best battle studies in recent memory. Hess has produced a superlative study of the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain, as well as the circumstances and strategies that led to that important engagement on the road to Atlanta. Atlanta, the gateway to the Deep South, was also a vital Confederate manufacturing and railroad hub. With both Vicksburg and Chattanooga secured by late 1863, Union General William T. Sherman determined that Atlanta would be his next target. Despite significant advantages in manpower and material, a Union victory in this effort was certainly not a foregone conclusion. Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston, the architect of the Army of Tennessee's Fabian defensive strategy during the Atlanta campaign, relied heavily on northern Georgia's rugged mountains to foil the efforts of the Union army group under Sherman. A chess match of marching, entrenching, flanking, and withdrawing unfolded during the late spring and early summer of 1864, with significant engagements taking place at Rocky Face Ridge, Resaca, Pickett's Mill, and elsewhere, eventually leading both armies to the fierce fight at Kennesaw Mountain on June 27, 1864.

In a lucid and essential introductory chapter, Hess provides readers with the background and context of the Atlanta campaign to June 1864. The Confederates created nine fortified lines between Dalton and Marietta, including four shifting defensive lines on and around Kennesaw Mountain. These details could easily overwhelm the reader, but Hess's presentation of these complex movements is a model of clarity and precision. Hess's description of the terrain and geography of the battle area, including the dominant nature of Big and Little Kennesaw, is also extremely useful in both setting the stage for the subsequent account of Sherman's assaults on Johnston's formidable position and explaining why the engagement took place at all.

Johnston determined to use Kennesaw Mountain, towering nearly seven hundred feet over the surrounding countryside and covering both Marietta and the essential railroad line into Atlanta, as a formidable defensive position. Sherman, recognizing the strength of the semicircular Kennesaw Mountain line, decided against a frontal assault and attempted to turn Johnston's left flank at Kolb's Farm. Hess dedicates a complete chapter to the June 22 fight at Kolb's Farm, describing and carefully analyzing Lieutenant General John Bell Hood's attack on Major General Joseph Hooker's corps. Hood neglected to determine the enemy's strength and position before ordering the assault, Hess finds, and though Sherman's turning movement was stymied, Hood's men were butchered in the ill-advised effort. Hess uses the Kolb's Farm episode to illustrate Hood's aggressive nature and

his shortcomings at managing any command above the division level. These issues would return to haunt the Army of Tennessee later in the fall of 1864, when Hood succeeded Johnston as commander.

His armies overextended and stretched to the breaking point in an effort to outflank Johnston's entrenched position, Sherman made the fateful decision to attempt a frontal assault on the Kennesaw Mountain line at Pigeon Hill and Cheatham's Hill. Hess explores Sherman's decision-making process in a full chapter, including the complicated preparations leading up to the attack, his foolish choice to make the assault in waves of stacked columns or regiments over broken elevation, and the deep misgivings expressed by Sherman's officers about the attack. Further, the attack would roll straight into the teeth of carefully prepared Confederate defenses on high ground, with meticulously chosen positions and well-sited artillery emplacements. Nevertheless, Sherman's decision to attack Johnston under perhaps the least favorable conditions he had yet encountered during the campaign is still puzzling. His postwar attempts to justify the order only muddled matters further. After weighing the available evidence, Hess concludes that the attack was, "in short, an experiment" on Sherman's part that included a calculated gamble with just enough forces to avoid crippling future offensive operations in the event of failure (p. 225).

After an extensive bombardment, the June 27 assault on the Confederate line was carried out by three of Sherman's corps, eight brigades of the Fifteenth, Fourth, and Fourteenth Corps. These attacks and their subsequent repulses are given a chapter's worth of narrative and detailed analysis. Hess also peppers his observations and conclusions with human aspects of the story. Among these are the famous Fourth Corps sector truce in which Confederate defenders permitted Union attackers to remove their wounded from the path of brush fires, Dan McCook's doomed assault on Cheatham Hill, and the heartbreaking expressions of many Union soldiers and officers as they prepared for the assaults they felt almost certain would fail.

Three additional chapters and a conclusion deal with the aftermath of Kennesaw Mountain, the Confederate abandonment of its positions and retreat toward Marietta, and Sherman's resumption of his advance toward Atlanta. Hess's conclusion in particular contains some of his best insights and analysis. The question that looms over any examination of the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain is, "Why did Sherman order the attack?" The answer, Hess concludes, "begs an understanding of context," which he gamely attempts to provide (p. 215). Sherman was deeply concerned, Hess explains, that Johnston would detach troops from his army and reinforce General Robert E. Lee's army in Virginia. This worry, coupled with both Sherman's limited sense of the tactical offensive and a feeling of desperation as offensive operations appeared to be grinding to a halt at the foot of Kennesaw Mountain, convinced him to order to attack. After the war, a number of Sherman's officers who participated in the assault criticized their old commander's decision bitterly, and Hess ably and fairly explores the merits of these criticisms.

Hess is an expert on Civil War field fortifications and brings his considerable experience and judgment to bear in an appendix on the surviving works at the Kennesaw Mountain National Battlefield Park. The battlefield contains some of the best-preserved and most instructive Civil War field fortifications that still exist outside Virginia, and Hess presents the reader with an invaluable collection of field notes and personally produced drawings of the Army of Tennessee's fortifications, along with his insights into the unique nature of western defenses in and around the engagement area. For students and specialists of Civil War field works, there is much to learn here; it is, as Hess puts it, "an outdoor classroom" worthy of intense study (p. 259). For instance, Hess finds that the Army of Tennessee had to deal with remarkably short fields of fire due to Georgia's hilly and uneven terrain. Confederate defenders, Hess notes, also resorted to unique and imaginative methods of configuring their defensive works, including building in-trench traverses and diamond-shaped earthworks, and eschewing the digging of ditches in front of parapets. These choices, Hess concludes, demonstrate that among other things, Confederates were very much preoccupied with the possibility of being outflanked by the enemy–a logical concern given the nature of the campaign to that point. As an added bonus, Hess includes another appendix detailing the history of the National Battlefield Park at Kennesaw Mountain, including the extreme threat of suburban development to the remaining battlefield property there.

The Battle of Kennesaw Mountain represents Sherman's most significant misjudgment in his effort to break the Confederate army in Georgia, but the defeat was only a temporary setback. Within a month, Sherman's army group was threatening Atlanta, and by fall, the town would be in Union hands; Kennesaw Mountain would, for many Union veterans, simply be a bad memory. As one Fourteenth Corps staff officer wrote after the fight, it "didn't make half as much impression on this army as two days steady rain would have made" (p. 226).

Despite its obvious strengths, the book is not flawless. The maps included with the text are inadequately detailed and can be confusing to readers hoping to sort out the complicated arrangements of troops and positions at the tactical level. The field notes and maps included in the appendix on field works would have benefited by more detailed information as to their precise locations, or even better, with GPS coordinates for curious researchers hoping to explore the sites themselves. These, however, are minor criticisms. Rooted in extensive primary and secondary research, tightly reasoned, and thoughtfully presented, this is the finest available study of the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain and should be required reading for students and scholars of the Atlanta campaign and the American Civil War in the West.

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