



Kenneth W. Noe. *The Howling Storm: Climate, Weather, and the American Civil War.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2020. 688 pp. \$59.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8071-7320-6.

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Published on H-CivWar (September, 2021)

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Civil War records—whether personal or official—tell the tale of a conflict that often hinged on, and always contended with, the weather. From the newest recruit to the most seasoned general, Civil War soldiers daily confronted nature in its various forms, but few aspects of the environment merited as many mentions as atmospheric and climatic conditions. Indeed, some soldiers' diaries focused entirely on the daily highs and lows, humidity levels, and cloud cover. Civilians, too, took notice of the weather, recording the temperature on battle days, commenting on precipitation and road conditions as armies marched through their towns and farms, and predicting success or failure based on the competing forces' abilities to adapt to the local climate.

Despite the ubiquity of weather in Civil War sources, few historians have given it due attention as a major factor in the conflict. In *Battling the Elements* (1998) geographer Harold Winters acknowledged how droughts and storms influenced specific battles; Robert Krick chronicled temperature changes and precipitation levels in his 2007 book, *Civil War Weather in Virginia*. Environmental historians like Jack Temple Kirby, Megan Kate Nelson, Kathryn Shively Meier, and others stressed the importance of environmental factors—weather among them—and have provided compelling arguments for integrating nature into our

analyses of the war. We nevertheless have not had, until now, an extended, comprehensive exploration of weather and climate in the context of Civil War history.

At a glance, Ken Noe's *The Howling Storm* would seem to add little new to the military history of the Civil War; all good battle histories note the weather and may even ascribe some importance to it. However (and this is a big however), when we read Noe's book as he hopes we will—that is, as an assessment of weather's impact across the entire war and not simply in the context of individual battles—the significance of its contribution cannot be overstated. *The Howling Storm* brings weather front and center, arguing that we cannot understand the military history of the war without accounting for “the metaphorical ‘Army of Weather’” (p. 9). Scouring his sources for the most evocative examples, Noe presents a compelling and eloquent assessment of weather's critical place in Civil War history.

Drawing from official reports, periodicals, and personal diaries and letters, he traces long-term trends such as droughts and pinpoints acute weather phenomena like blizzards to demonstrate clearly how such events shaped campaign plans, affected logistical and operational decisions, and occasionally stopped entire armies in their tracks. Across twenty-four chapters and 496 pages of text

(plus an additional 106 pages of notes), Noe takes a long chronological view, following weather patterns from the opening shots of the war in April 1861 through to the surrenders in April and May 1865. In the introduction, Noe carefully outlines the broad strokes of climate in each of the main theaters and identifies the predominant soil types in each region; in the following chapters, he pays close attention to how those factors, among other environmental considerations, combined to create favorable or problematic conditions for the forces who fought among them. Noe covers all major battles and campaigns as well as minor engagements and gives ample attention to relevant issues like supply and mobilization. His conclusion is concise yet full of insight. In a scant four pages (pp. 492-495), Noe sums up his argument, noting that although the weather initially seemed to favor the Confederacy, the Union's industrial might—including capacity to produce shoes and uniforms and to transport food and materiel—and its more adaptable, imaginative political and military leadership turned that foe into an ally.

The Howling Storm is a traditional military history in its narrative structure, focusing on the progression of battles and following the movements of armies. This is both the book's strength and its weakness. Readers looking to unearth new battle details or find fresh dirt on commanders instead will find well-trodden ground. Noe's weather argument does not challenge our basic understanding of the war's trajectory, especially when read piecemeal by chapter, but when taken as a whole, it provides essential nuance and forces us to reckon with nature's place in military affairs in a way that cannot be discounted. The sheer amount of evidence is overwhelming and, when paired with Noe's sophisticated military analysis, convincing. Some readers will be daunted by the book's heft—it is a monumental tome—and some may argue that Noe might have made his case more concisely; however, they would be missing the point. Noe's nearly day-by-day account perfectly illustrates that the weather was ubiquitous,

unavoidable, and uncontrollable, and that it must play a central role in future historical analyses of this war and of others.

Where Noe's argument and evidentiary base are sound, his bibliography contains some curious flaws. Inexplicably, Joan Cashin's most recent book, *War Stuff* (2018) is listed as a published primary source (p. 612), which is doubly unfortunate since the cited secondary sources are overwhelmingly (though not surprisingly, considering the demographics of Civil War military historians) written by men. There are other bibliographic oddities as well, including the omission of a chapter in Cashin's *War Matters* (2018) on the environmental history of Antietam (co-written by Timothy Silver and me), as well as a chapter (yes, also mine) in Brian Drake's *The Blue, the Gray, and the Green* (2012) that includes analysis of weather and acoustical shadows. Inclusion of the former would have added nuance and context to Noe's assessment of the single bloodiest day of the war; the latter poses conclusions similar to Noe's about Burnside's Mud March and the battles at Fort Donelson, Iuka, and Perryville, yet is not cited. Perhaps the general citation in the bibliography to the full volume was meant to cover it, though Megan Kate Nelson's excellent chapter on New Mexico in the same collection merits its own bibliographic line. By the same token, lest I seem unduly concerned only about citations to my own work (and here let me state that Noe cites other publications of mine plenty), Kathryn Shively Meier's chapter in the Drake volume deserves its own entry as well, since weather and climate were such integral aspects to why Civil War soldiers engaged in self-care. I will not belabor the point, especially since Noe is meticulous in his research and conscientious in citing and supporting scholarship by women, but that there are so few citations to women highlights the continued imbalance along gender lines in Civil War military historiography.

On the whole, Noe's book is one to be reckoned with and is a must-read for serious students of the Civil War. Noe's writing is engaging, accessible, and at times lyrical, and will appeal to committed general interest readers. Although not likely to appear on undergraduate syllabi (due to its size, not its quality), *The Howling Storm* should be included on graduate reading lists for students of Civil War, military, and environmental history. It is an excellent book and a necessary and welcome addition to Civil War scholarship.

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Citation: Lisa M. Brady. Review of Noe, Kenneth W. *The Howling Storm: Climate, Weather, and the American Civil War*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. September, 2021.

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