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Published on H-CivWar (January, 2024)

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There have been countless books written about the Battle of Antietam, and D. Scott Hartwig’s masterpiece, *I Dread the Thought of the Place: The Battle of Antietam and the End of the Maryland Campaign*, ranks near the pinnacle in terms of quality and detail. The book is the second in Hartwig’s two-part series on that campaign and, together with the first installment, *To Antietam Creek: The Maryland Campaign of September 1862* (2012), serves as a balanced and meticulous account of the events of September 1862. *I Dread the Thought of the Place* picks up immediately on the morning of September 17, with the commencement of the bloodiest single day of the Civil War. Hartwig adroitly balances events of the battle, analysis of the key decision-makers on both sides, personal stories of the men who fought, and in many cases died, in the fields around Sharpsburg, and connectivity between the various components of the entire engagement. The end result is exceptional.

The progression of Hartwig’s narrative is logical and clear, and at its foundation follows a chronological pattern. The general outline of the battle will, then, be rather familiar to the reader. His account begins with Maj. Gen. Joseph Hooker’s Federal 1st Corps attack in the north and progresses through the actions in the northern half of the battlefield as they occurred: Hood’s counterattack, the arrival of the Federal 12th Corps, Brig. Gen. John Sedgwick’s attack into the West Woods, and the ensuing Confederate counterattack. Hartwig follows the focus of the fighting as it shifts to the Federal attacks on the Sunken Lane, followed by the day’s concluding events on the southern portion of the battlefield, with the Federal 9th Corps’ attacks across the Rohrback Bridge to the Harpers Ferry Road, south of Sharpsburg.

While this general outline is certainly familiar, Hartwig develops some rather unique and highly insightful narrative points throughout. A particular emphasis throughout Hartwig’s argu-
ment posits that Antietam was not a battle that neatly fits into the “northern-center-southern, morning-noon-afternoon” pattern that is common in many accounts of the engagement. He does a superb job of demonstrating the numerous intersections of events, units, leaders, and effects across the entire battlefield, throughout the day. One example of such connectivity includes his treatment of the fighting around the Sunken Lane over the course of many hours, involving a multitude of Federal units against a vast menagerie of hastily thrown together Confederate units, many of which had experienced heavy fighting already that day. Hartwig does an exceptional job of demonstrating how the decisions that leaders on both sides took in the attack on and defense of the Confederate center relied heavily on ongoing events elsewhere along Antietam Creek.

Three other particular elements deserve praise in his account. First, Hartwig devotes a considerable amount of time to looking at the activity on the west side of the Middle Bridge, a sequence of events that is often ignored in accounts of the battle but which, as Hartwig posits, played a significant role in Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan’s perception of Confederate defenses. Second, he considers the mid-afternoon advance of the 9th Corps attack in admirable detail, particularly looking at the challenges and opportunities that existed for that unit as it tried to break the Confederate line south of Sharpsburg. And third, he deftly weaves together the actions of infantry, artillery, and cavalry units across the battlefield; at no time is the reader left wondering about the effects of those three services working together, or not, on both sides of the engagement.

Another strength of the book is the final six chapters, which deal with the battle’s aftermath. While the fight at Shepherdstown is addressed to the same degree of detail as the events of September 17, Hartwig also includes chapters on the aftermath of the battle, the travails of Sharpsburg’s civilians, the impact of the battle on emancipation, the Army of the Potomac in the two months after the battle, and, perhaps most interestingly, the events surrounding McClellan’s last weeks in command of the army, as well as an assessment of his overall influence and abilities during the campaign and after.

Throughout the narrative, Hartwig examines and evaluates the leadership on both sides of the battle and, while a list of those particular conclusions would be exhaustive, some of his more notable conclusions include rather scathing indictments of Maj. Gen. Edwin Sumner, the Federal II Corps commander, and Col. George Crook, of whom Hartwig noted that “no brigade commander in the 9th Corps that day surpassed George Crook for ineptitude and bungling” (p. 486). Other commanders, though, to Hartwig, performed far more credibly, including Hooker for the Union and Maj. Gen. Lafayette McLaws for the Confederates. One recurring aspect that the author highlights throughout the battle is the multitude of challenges brought on by the convoluted and confusing command structure in the Army of Northern Virginia, a fault created and perpetuated by its commander, Gen. Robert E. Lee. McClellan’s performance, as noted above, merited nearly an entire chapter, beyond numerous discussions throughout the book on individual decisions (or lack thereof) that the Federal commander made during the course of the day.

At the heart of the book, though, is Hartwig’s inclusion of the many personal stories of bravery and tragedy experienced by participants in both armies. In most cases, these perspectives not only add a very real human point of view and window to the battle, but also contribute to a clearer picture of the battle’s conduct and effects. There are numerous personal accounts taken from unit histories, letters, diaries, official reports, newspaper articles, and other sources that add a tremendous degree of vibrancy to Hartwig’s work.

For all of its positive attributes, *I Dread the Thought of the Place* is not a book for those who
are novices to the study of Antietam. Hartwig's account is profoundly detailed, with much of his narrative focusing on regimental-level actions and perspectives. Both because of and in spite of this laudable attribute, the complexity of the battle, with the near-constant attack and counterattack cycle, across different geographical positions, influenced by different leaders at different times and places, can potentially become overwhelming for those not already familiar, at least to a degree, with the battle, despite the excellent and well-placed maps. But for those with a firm foundation on Antietam, this work will add immensely to the understanding of and engaging with not just the events of September 17, 1862, but the overall significance and influence of the Battle of Antietam and the Maryland Campaign as a whole. Hartwig has crafted a superb narrative that contributes immensely to our understanding of the events of September 1862, and it should serve as the standard account of the battle for the foreseeable future.

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