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The Civil War in the West: Victory and Defeat from the Appalachians to the Mississippi

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The Civil War in the West: Victory and Defeat from the Appalachians to the Mississippi, by Earl J. Hess. The Littlefield History of the Civil War Era. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. xv, 392 pp. Illustrations, map, notes, bibliography, index. \$40.00 cloth.

Reviewer Robert Wooster is Regents Professor of History at Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi. He is the author of *American Military Frontiers: The United States Army in the West, 1783–1900* (2009) and *The Civil War Bookshelf: 50 Must-Read Books about the War Between the States* (2001).

Author of acclaimed Civil War books on the rifle musket, trench warfare, Pickett’s Charge, the crater at Petersburg, Union soldiers, and individual campaigns, historian Earl J. Hess sets his sights even higher in the present work, a history of the war between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River. “Union victory in the Civil War began in the Mississippi Valley” (318), insists Hess, who attributes Northern success not to its material advantages but to better generalship, higher morale, and development of a logistical system capable of transporting and supplying large armies over an area larger than France, Switzerland, and the Low Countries combined. The result is a well-researched and intelligent narrative that is essential to understanding America’s bloodiest conflict.

Events on the battlefield eventually settled the war. Hess offers a lively account of the region’s most familiar battles and campaigns—Forts Henry and Donelson, Shiloh, New Orleans, Corinth, Perryville, Stones River, Vicksburg, Meridian, Chickamauga, Chattanooga, Knoxville, Atlanta, Franklin, Nashville, and Sherman’s March to the Sea. In addition, Hess follows Sherman’s (and later John Schofield’s) veterans as they marched through the Carolinas. What really sets this book apart, however, are its thoughtful discussions of logistics, occupation duties, the cotton trade, guerrillas, and refugees. Particularly in the west, argues Hess, “Civil War armies ate their way to either victory or defeat, devouring resources like swarms of locusts and depriving friends and foes alike of their means of living” (xiv). Union generals, with Sherman and Grant in the fore, grasped this reality much better than their Confederate counterparts, and the ability of their troops to combine foraging with rail and river supply lines enabled them to penetrate the Southern heartland.

Sharply differing from recent efforts to link the North’s increasingly destructive methods to the activities of pro-Confederate guerrillas, Hess makes a convincing alternative case. Almost from the beginning, Union and Confederate soldiers alike scoured the surrounding countryside to supplement their army rations, avoiding and ignoring the efforts of their officers to prevent them from doing so. Moreover, Hess

points out that men bearing guns often take what they want from unarmed civilians. Finally, Union generals came to understand that only by living off the land could their armies overcome logistical shortages and undertake the operations, as Sherman put it, necessary to “illustrate the vulnerability of the South” (251).

As large numbers of Iowans and midwesterners served with the Union armies of the Tennessee, the Cumberland, the Gulf, the Mississippi, and the Ohio, *The Civil War in the West* has much to interest readers of this journal. Hess emphasizes, for example, the economic and psychological importance of the Mississippi valley to residents of the Old Northwest. Abraham Lincoln understood these regional sensibilities much better than did his fellow Kentuckian Jefferson Davis.

Finally, the extensive attention Hess devotes to the challenges of occupying huge chunks of Confederate territory and dealing with thousands of black and white refugees highlights the North’s wartime achievements between the Appalachians and the Mississippi. Victory in the west, as he demonstrates, was hardly inevitable; rather, it stemmed from the North’s more creative use of technology, superior resource management, recruitment of thousands of black Southerners to the Union cause, and development of policies that enabled them to occupy and control immense chunks of hostile territory while at the same time assembling field armies large enough to defeat the enemy.

American Oracle: The Civil War in the Civil Rights Era, by David W. Blight. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011. 314 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$27.95 cloth.

Reviewer Dan Lewis has a doctorate in American Studies and has taught American literature and U.S. history at several community colleges in Virginia. He is the director of Educational Programs for the Virginia Community College System.

In his study of Civil War memory, David W. Blight examines how the historical subjects of slavery and emancipation were marginalized during the Civil War Centennial in the context of the civil rights era. Blight examines the works of four prominent American writers in the mid-twentieth century—Robert Penn Warren, Bruce Catton, Edmund Wilson, and James Baldwin—“because they represent divergent backgrounds, genres, and points of view” (8). *American Oracle* provides a rich and probing analysis of the writers’ “literary and historical meditations on the Civil War during its Centennial years” (252). For the distinguished author and meticulous researcher of the award-winning *Race and Reconciliation: The Civil War in American Memory* (2001), the