

Shiloh—In Hell Before Night

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Book Reviews

an important segment of the American mind in the nineteenth century.

If the twentieth century is the age of sociology, then the first half of the nineteenth century was part of the age of religion. Americans tended to think about social problems in religious terms. Slavery was not simply an inefficient economic system that harmed both the slaveholder and slave alike, it was a moral evil. Opposition to the extension of slavery was not a social or economic program, it was a holy crusade. When the editors of the religious press dealt with issues in these terms, they reflected the thinking of a large part of the population. It is precisely this that makes the antebellum religious newspaper a valuable historical source, and Norton's work is a valuable introductory study of this source.

Alan M. Schroder
Iowa State Historical Department
Division of the State Historical Society
Iowa City, IA

Shiloh—in Hell before Night, by James Lee McDonough. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1977. pp. xii, 260. \$9.95.

Confusion and ineptness characterized the fledgling armies of the North and South during the first year of the Civil War. Something of a carnival spirit, fostered by a belief that one major battle would decide the war, affected the unseasoned recruits and the more experienced commanders as well. The hopes for a short conflict and the somewhat cavalier approach to war by some died an agonizing death at Shiloh. The carnage of this battle, its causes and consequences, are documented in James Lee McDonough's *Shiloh—in Hell before Night*.

McDonough asserts that the Confederates had the chance to turn the Union army's lightly defended left flank and destroy the forces of General Ulysses S. Grant. This would have turned the Union tide in the West and perhaps prevented the Yankees from severing Confederate east-west communications. The Confederates had to win to keep from being split by a Union wedge. Due to the confusion between Confederate Generals Al-

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bert Sydney Johnson and P. G. T. Beauregard, however, the Union flank was never successfully enveloped. McDonough maintains that Beauregard's termination of the attack late in the afternoon of April 6 was not contested by General Braxton Bragg and was a logical decision. Subsequently labelled as "the lost opportunity," the decision to retire was based on Beauregard's belief that he could annihilate Grant's army the following morning. McDonough concludes that had the Confederates seized upon the weaknesses of the Union positions and won the battle, Grant and General William T. Sherman would have been relieved. With Grant and Sherman out of command, the complexion of the war would have been quite different.

McDonough should be commended for describing the battle in human as well as strategic terms. To accomplish this he has incorporated a plethora of personal accounts, unit histories, and official reports. With personal recollections, however, he is careful to verify the accounts with the impressions of others or official records. Conflicting impressions by the participants are often presented for the reader's assessment. As a consequence, most of the work is based on primary sources.

There are some aspects of the work which tend to interfere with the flow of the narrative. Too many individual stories can impede the reader's grasp of the complex facets of a battle. In the same way, recurring descriptions of battered corpses, although valid with the carnage of Shiloh, can lose their effectiveness. Repetition of this type tends to dull the sensitivity of one who must rely on a written account for the story of war. The constant designation of the various regiments, invaluable for the tracing of unit activities, can also confuse the general reader. Only when a unit is unique, such as one with excessive casualties or one which fled the field, should specific distinctions be made. Otherwise, there is little gained in differentiating between the 5th, 7th, 9th, and 10th Mississippi.

For the military historian in search of a work on either the western campaigns, a decisive battle of the war, or Shiloh specifically, *Shiloh—in Hell before Night* is heartily recommended.

Larry D. Roberts
Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, OK

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