

## Theater of a Separate War: The Civil War West of the Mississippi River, 1861– 1865

Robert Wooster

*Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi*

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A thread running through the book is the creation of a strong national government, which the author calls a Union "leviathan." The success of the war effort required leadership in both economic and military spheres; governors were extraordinarily cooperative in recognizing the need for strong national power. They created a nation, rather than just a collection of states.

This is a big book. In covering the stories of Union governors, Engle effectively retells the central story of the Union homefront. The work is based on massive archival research. It features accessible prose. However, its size, the plethora of characters depicted, and the scope of the argument may intimidate casual readers.

One should always hesitate before using the word *definitive*. Nevertheless, Engle's book will be the indispensable source on Union governors for a long time to come.

*Theater of a Separate War: The Civil War West of the Mississippi River, 1861–1865*, by Thomas W. Cutrer. The Littlefield History of the Civil War Era. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017. xiii, 588. Map, notes, bibliography, index. \$40.00 hardcover.

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

Thomas W. Cutrer's *Theater of a Separate War: The Civil War West of the Mississippi River, 1861–1865* represents the first modern attempt by a Civil War specialist to craft a comprehensive study of the entire Trans-Mississippi West from secession through the collapse of the Confederacy. This is operational and tactical history at its best, told in bold, sweeping terms. Wisely, Cutrer does not attempt to overstate the significance of the fighting west of the Mississippi for the overall war effort. As he acknowledges, "The Civil War was neither won nor lost west of the Mississippi River" (443). Still, as the fastest-growing part of the South and as a vital component of the campaigns for the Mississippi River, the region had strategic importance, especially in the wake of Napoleon III's military intervention in Mexico. Thus, as Cutrer demonstrates, "It was of vital importance in and of itself" (448).

Those seeking a comprehensive narrative of the conflicts between Union and Confederate soldiers and sailors and their Indian allies from the Mississippi River to New Mexico need go no further. Printed primary materials are supplemented in some cases by manuscript collections, but the strength of the work lies in its narrative power. With an

eye for the telling quotation, Cutrer describes in often vivid prose the maneuvering of soldiers who usually deserved better than the sad leadership of generals like Earl Van Dorn, Theophilus Holmes, Nathaniel P. Banks, and Benjamin F. Butler. Thematically, Cutrer emphasizes just how savage the war became in Missouri, Kansas, and the Indian Territory, as well as of the Federal advantage in artillery that proved decisive in sharp (if often overlooked) battles like Buzzards Prairie, Louisiana, and Honey Springs, Indian Territory. Even more insightful is his reminder that the geographic boundaries of military districts and departments had unforeseen but significant consequences. Already suffering from a distinct disadvantage in material resources, the Confederates found that their defense of the Mississippi River was made even more difficult because lines of military authority were “divided east and west . . . with authority sharply delineated by the river” (4). Whereas the north-south axis of Union commands promoted (at least in many cases) “the common cause of opening the Mississippi” (4), Southerners west of the great river had little reason to cooperate with their cousins to the east, and vice versa. Thus, more often than not, the Trans-Mississippi was to the Confederacy a separate war, long before the fall of Vicksburg.

Writers of big and ambitious books like this get to choose their focus—in this case, Cutrer’s interest lies in the Civil War itself rather than the conflicts between federal and local authorities in New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, Minnesota, and the Dakotas versus Native Americans that occurred during the war, which are treated in but one of 24 chapters. The Confederate recapture of Galveston in January 1863, for example, receives 20 paragraphs of text, whereas the three-and-a-half-year conflict (not two, as Cutrer suggests) in Minnesota sparked by the Dakota uprising in 1862 receives just 11 paragraphs. As a consequence, although Cutrer’s work is clearly superior to the earlier work of historian of American Indians Alvin M. Josephy Jr., *The Civil War in the American West* (1991), those interested in more emphasis on Indian versus non-Indian conflicts will still find Josephy’s older work most useful.

With that caveat, *Theater of a Separate War* is the best single volume on the Civil War west of the Mississippi River. Students of Iowa history will find much of interest, with the service of Iowa troops in the fighting at Pea Ridge, in the campaigns for South Texas of 1863–64, and more explicitly the devastating losses suffered by the Nineteenth and Twentieth Iowa Infantry regiments at Prairie Grove receiving the author’s due attention. Unfortunately, the publisher has done readers a major disservice by publishing such an important book without including the maps necessary to bring the splendidly written text to life. Almost astonishingly for a detailed operational narrative like this, the book

includes only one map, and that map, though clear and pleasing to the eye, fails to locate points like Helena, Arkansas; Alexandria, Louisiana; or Niblett's Bluff, Texas—all places of strategic importance referred to repeatedly in the text.

*Pioneer Girl Perspectives: Exploring Laura Ingalls Wilder*, edited by Nancy Tystad Koupal. Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2017. 317 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, index. \$29.95 hardcover.

Reviewer John J. Fry is professor of history at Trinity Christian College, Palos Heights, Illinois. He is the editor of *Almost Pioneers* (2013) and is writing a biography of Laura Ingalls Wilder that pays particular attention to her faith.

When reading Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House books, one is led to believe that things happened exactly as they were written. In addition, at a speech at a book fair in Detroit in 1937, Wilder said, in reference to the most recent book published, that "every story in this novel, all the circumstances, each incident are true. All I have told is true but it is not the whole truth" (15). After Wilder's death in 1957, however, readers and researchers began to discover many ways that the books were not historically accurate. That process accelerated when it was revealed that Wilder had previously written an adult memoir she called "Pioneer Girl" that publishers had rejected. The memoir was first made widely available to the public by the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library in West Branch, Iowa, during the 1980s. The South Dakota Historical Society (SDHS) Press published *Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography* in 2014, and it quickly became a best-seller. It is now in its ninth printing; more than 165,000 copies have been sold.

*Pioneer Girl Perspectives* is a collection of essays edited by Nancy Tystad Koupal, director of the Pioneer Girl Project, and published by the SDHS Press. The volume was originally meant to address how the publication of *Pioneer Girl* shapes our understanding of Wilder and her work. However, contributors take their considerations in a number of new directions, including the life and works of Wilder's daughter, Rose Wilder Lane, the popularity of the Little House books, and the books' literary value.

The book is divided into four sections. "Working Writers" begins by reprinting Wilder's Detroit Book Fair speech, and then biographers of Wilder and Lane engage the different types of writing each published. In "Beginnings and Misdirections," authors consider the history of the Pioneer Girl manuscript and the Little House books compared to other early twentieth-century children's literature. Historians writing in the third section, "Wilder's Place and Time," situate Wilder in regional