



Extreme Civil War: Guerrilla Warfare, Environment, and Race on the Trans-Mississippi Frontier by Matthew M. Stith.

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In *Extreme Civil War*, historian Matthew Stith (Univ. of Texas-Tyler) argues for the importance of environmental factors in a neglected theater of the US Civil War. He discusses the efforts of both sides' combatants, regular and irregular, but especially their civilian populations in a tri-racial border region to keep some control of their natural environment in the face of the violent conduct and destructiveness of the war. He also adds to a new vein of scholarship on environmental factors, guerrilla warfare, and the influence of the Civil War on the conquest of the American West; in the process, he opens promising avenues of further inquiry.

The book originated in Stith's doctoral dissertation¹ and reflects the interests of his adviser, Daniel Sutherland,² in the region around Fayetteville, Arkansas, as well as the emerging literature on the irregular warfare that was rife in most Confederate home fronts. Stith vividly evokes the death, destruction, and depopulation that occurred in the rugged and remote region's mountains, valleys, fields, and forests. As the human presence and management of the built environment broke down amid the violence, farms reverted to thickets and forests, and feral swine populations exploded in the desolate landscapes.³

Stith proceeds roughly chronologically, beginning with an overview of the still-developing prewar Trans-Mississippi border region, the early struggles for control between free-soilers in Kansas, secessionists in Missouri and Arkansas, and Native Americans still recovering from their tragic removal to the Indian Territory in present-day Oklahoma. An early period of Confederate control triggered the first exodus of refugees, as Unionists and loyal Indians fled to Kansas and Missouri, allowing pro-Southern forces to briefly consolidate control over the region. But the North's larger population and advantages in matériel enabled Union forces to wrest control from the Confederates after battles at Pea Ridge (6-8 Mar. 1862), Prairie Grove (7 Dec. 1862), and Honey Springs (17 July 1863).

In his conclusion, the author addresses the ongoing debate over the relative importance of field armies conducting formal battles and the daily incidents of guerrilla violence that beset most theaters of the war. The answer is, of course, that both were crucial to the war's outcome. That said, Stith counteracts the perennial popular overemphasis on conventional battles fought in the eastern theater. Admittedly, he cannot escape the conclusion that the fighting ended with the surrender of the Confederacy's regular forces, but he shows that the breakdown of civil society on the home front pre-

1. "Social War: People, Nature, and Irregular Warfare on the Trans-Mississippi Frontier, 1861-65" (Univ. of Arkansas, 2010).

2. Author of *A Savage Conflict: The Decisive Role of Guerrillas in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2009), and editor of *Guerrillas, Unionists, and Violence on the Confederate Home Front* (Fayetteville: U Arkansas Pr, 1999), and, with Anne J. Bailey, *Civil War Arkansas: Beyond Battles and Leaders* (Fayetteville: U Arkansas Pr, 2000).

3. Similarly, during World War II, as the Pacific became a theater of battle between the American and Japanese navies, and systematic fishing fell off dramatically, many species, including whales, experienced a marked resurgence in numbers. See William Tsutsui, "The Pelagic Empire: Reconsidering Japanese Expansion," in Ian Miller et al., eds., *Japan at Nature's Edge: The Environmental Context of Global Power* (Honolulu: U Hawaii Pr, 2013).

vented the South's armies from continuing in the field after the 1864 campaign season. "Most no longer cared (if they ever really had) about large campaigns, battles or strategies. For Unionist and Confederate civilians ... the war had become squarely about simple survival" (127).

While I doubt that civilians may never have "really cared" about the struggle (it is difficult to foment rebellion among an apathetic population), the contention that the war was primarily about survival offers a productive new line of inquiry for historians of the environment during the Civil War. Stith often comes close to calling the conflict a war for resources, specifically other men's labor and the fertile land essential to nineteenth-century agriculture—"the fight on the frontier became a protracted struggle fought over, and with, the natural world" (157). If environmental and military historians were to extend this line of argument to other theaters of the war, they might move beyond narrower inquiries about the conflict's effects on the built and natural environments to demonstrate that environmental factors lay at the very root of the war. The desire to control the Trans-Mississippian lands just being opened for settlement and to maintain a chattel-based labor system echoes colonial and indigenous conflicts over access to and control of natural resources. Stith leads his horse to this provocative water, but will it drink?

One weakness of the book is its failure to determine precisely when and how widely agriculture broke down on the Trans-Mississippi frontier. The author marshals an impressive body of anecdotal evidence, but stints on the hard statistical analysis needed to prove that crop yields declined across the region. Though the frontier was a patchwork of viable farms and abandoned fields, depending on the proximity of military encampments and the activity of bushwhackers, it remains murky just how the destruction proceeded across the land, when specific regions became uninhabitable, and how long they remained so. We know some loyal civilians organized "fortified colonies" (strategic hamlets?) for protection against guerrillas and to serve as supply depots for federal forces (154). But Stith offers no detailed discussion of their long-term sustainability or their reliance on federal resources for their establishment and protection. Did they ever supply a market where crops could be sold in exchange for other necessities, let alone provide refuges for the displaced (124)?

Military historians have long seen the region as the venue of successive counterinsurgency efforts, from isolating the civilian population to reorganizing military units into more numerous but smaller, highly mobile pursuit forces capable of tracking and destroying insurgents. Stith correctly notes that the harsh tactics of Confederate guerrillas in the countryside hurt their cause and hastened their demise.

As for the element of "race" indicated in the book's subtitle, although fighting along the frontier involved a complex web of freedpeople and both pro-Union and pro-Confederate Indians and whites, racial animosities do not figure much in its narrative. While racial tensions fueled some violence, the same was true of other theaters as well, notably between Native Americans and blacks in the Appalachians; this makes it hard to gauge how critical race was to the disordering of the environment specifically in the Trans-Mississippi West. Nor do we learn here which racial groups were best suited to cope with environmental challenges. Despite the myth of the "ecological Indian," living in greater harmony with nature, Indian settlements were just as badly devastated as free-soil and slavery-based communities. Though some evidence suggests Indian soldiers were abler to deal with environmental challenges, it is far from certain that this was true on the home front as well.⁴ Of the three relevant groups, blacks

4. See my "The Army, Native Agency and the Path to Assimilation: The First Indian Home Guards in the American Civil War," *Kansas History* 36 (2013) 2–21 – www.miwsr.com/rd/1705.htm.

seemed best positioned to survive, thanks to sanctuaries like Fort Scott and Fort Leavenworth in Kansas and the army's far more efficient collection and distribution of life-sustaining natural resources.⁵

Matthew Stith's principal achievement in *Extreme Civil War* is to redirect our attention from the Civil War's dramatic set-piece battles to a broader vista of ordinary civilians struggling to scratch out a living on devastated, overgrown farmsteads, living in fear of the hoofbeats that presaged vicious partisan attacks. Had secessionists foreseen these brutal realities of civil strife, they would not have been so quick to heed the siren song of armed insurrection.

5. See Ian Michael Spurgeon, *Soldiers in the Army of Freedom: The First Kansas Colored, the Civil War's First African-American Combat Unit* (Norman: U Okla Pr, 2014).