



## *River of Death: The Chickamauga Campaign, vol. 1: The Fall of Chattanooga*

by William Glenn Robertson.

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This magisterial volume on the war of movement leading up to the climactic Battle of Chickamauga will long remain the standard study of events in the Civil War's western theater in summer 1863. Students, scholars, and general readers will find an almost overwhelming wealth of information within its pages. Its author, historian William Robertson, formerly of the Army Command and General Staff College, helped re-establish the staff ride as an element of professional military education after a hiatus of some sixty years. His familiarity with his subject matter may well exceed that of the two principal commanders involved, US Maj. Gen. William S. Rosecrans and CSA Gen. Braxton Bragg. Besides his lifetime's study of the relevant primary sources, Robertson made many annual battlefield visits from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s. The resulting volume knits together the firsthand accounts of hundreds of participants in a comprehensive whole unrivalled in detail or complexity.

Robertson's narrative mimics on a grander scale the framework of a staff ride: he begins with the strategic situation in mid-1863. After its pivotal defeats at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, the Confederacy knew the critical importance of keeping Federal forces from invading and occupying the Deep South, the region of most of its remaining industrial capacity. The author then turns to the plans of each theater commander and their execution.

Rosecrans, typically dismissed in the scholarship as one of a series of failed successors to Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan, is portrayed by Robertson as a competent, at times visionary commander, slighted by a War Department reluctant to expend resources on a failed commander in a secondary theater. Bragg, too, appears here as a complex and human figure whose leadership and operational skills could have led to a different outcome had he been supported by more competent subordinates.

The book is not a hagiography, however. Robertson points out that Rosecrans's campaign plan "was incomplete, with major decisions still pending" (146); these included whether and where to attempt a crossing of the Tennessee River in numbers large enough to constitute a main effort. Such indecision ceded the tactical initiative to Bragg, prolonging the campaign but preserving the Union force. The author concludes with a cliff-hanger: Col. Timothy Robbins Stanley's brigade of Maj. Gen. James Negley's division has just entered McElmore's Cove, in the shadow of Lookout Mountain, and is about to be surrounded and attacked by elements of Confederate Gen. D.H. Hill's corps.

Bragg refused to seize the initiative and attack Rosecrans before his preparations were complete. He initially believed that, if reinforced by Gen. Joseph E. Johnston's eleven thousand men in Mississippi, he could beat Rosecrans. But his deputy, Lt. Gen. Leonidas Polk, so disparaged the quality of Johnston's forces that Bragg came to doubt their effectiveness in battle.

Bragg had the misfortune to mount his first campaign ... saddled with an incompetent deputy eleven years older than himself... Unable to call upon his senior subordinates for honest counsel, Bragg

had no one to assist him in formulating strategy.... He simply redoubled his efforts to handle the army's administrative work himself. The result was a downward spiral in his physical condition (58-59, 470)

that impaired his ability to command.

Robertson devotes most of his narrative to the granular details of the deployments of formations and individuals as the Union Army of the Cumberland slowly drove Confederate forces from Tennessee. In the process, Rosecrans's men traversed some of the most unforgiving terrain confronted by any American army before 1918. Especially valuable here is the author's discussion of the supporting units that enabled Union forces to cross three mountain ranges and several major and minor waterways.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout, Robertson gives voice to hundreds of individual combatants resurrected from archives in twenty-seven states and the District of Columbia. Their vivid first-person accounts lend extraordinary depth and color to his narrative. Besides soldiers' typical complaints about hunger, heat, rain, and mud, Robertson's recreation of the daily lives of men on campaign recalls the seminal works of Bell Wiley.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the author's avowed intent to tell the story of the campaign "comprehensively" (xv), his fixation on the interactions of personalities sometimes veers off into speculation. For example, we read that Rosecrans "was hardly disappointed" at the lack of cooperation he received from Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's forces in the Department of the Tennessee: "Supremely confident of his own abilities and those of his army, he had long been prepared to conduct the coming campaign on his own" (267). If Rosecrans was in fact a shrewd tactician, then he must have known that not pressing Maj. Gen. Henry Halleck to order Grant to work in concert with him would enable Johnston to later reinforce Bragg against him. In an earlier lapse, he argues that an unprovable class bias Polk felt against Bragg was instigated "no doubt" by Polk's mother and wife (68). The evidence for the men's mutual antipathy is well documented; Robertson's "circumstantial" argument is intriguing, but lacks substantiation.

More compelling is Robertson's extensive coverage of the political considerations that led each commander to appreciate the value of Chattanooga as a communications node and resource depot. To this must be added the North's recognition that a significant percentage of the people of eastern Tennessee harbored pro-Union sentiments. It seemed to President Lincoln's administration that success in the 1864 election cycle would require liberation of this oppressed population. Both Halleck and Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton made this very clear to Rosecrans in a series of stinging missives from Washington. After one particularly egregious note from Halleck, Rosecrans responded: "You do not appear to observe the fact that this noble army has driven the rebels from Middle Tennessee .... I beg in behalf of this army that the War Department may not overlook so great an event because it is not written in letters of blood" (107)—this was a sideways swipe at both Grant's and Maj. Gen. George Meade's recent but costly victories. Bragg's relations with Richmond were no better. Beset by rivals Polk and Lt. Gen. Simon Bolivar Buckner and absent formal authority over Johnston's "super-department" forces in Mississippi, Bragg lacked political clout within the Jefferson Davis administration (409).

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1. Unfortunately, the book lacks a decent map program to help readers keep track of hundreds of place names (many long-since disappeared or altered); nearly five hundred pages of narrative include only eight black-and-white maps.

2. *Viz.*, *The Life of Johnny Reb: The Common Soldier of the Confederacy* (1943) and *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union* (1952), both often reprinted.

This first volume of *River of Death* concludes with a terse and tantalizing summation of the grasp of *operational art* by Rosecrans and Bragg. But that term appears nowhere in the text, nor for that matter does Robertson discuss the Chickamauga campaign using the salient military terminology he knows so well. This makes his book less rewarding than it might have been, and not only for military audiences. Despite this missed opportunity to educate a wider audience on the complexities of modern warfare, William Robertson's work is the equal of the best existing studies<sup>3</sup> of the Chattanooga campaign and their superior in the detail of its narrative and argumentation.

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3. E.g., Peter Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound: The Battle of Chickamauga* (Urbana: U Illinois Pr, 1992); Steven Woodworth, *Six Armies in Tennessee: The Chickamauga and Chattanooga Campaigns* (Lincoln: U Nebraska Pr, 1998); or David Powell, *The Chickamauga Campaign*, vol. 1: *Mad Irregular Battle: From the Crossing of the Tennessee River through the Second Day, August 22–September 19, 1863* (El Dorado Hills, CA: Savas Beatie, 2014).