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Review Essay

WAGING THE CIVIL WAR IN THE SOUTHWEST

Joseph G. Dawson III

Interest in the Civil War in New Mexico increased following the publication of Martin Hardwick Hall's notable and respected *Sibley's New Mexico Campaign* originally published in 1960.¹ Hall followed up his campaign study with *The Confederate Army of New Mexico*, focusing on the organization of Confederate forces led by Gen. Henry Hopkins Sibley.² Hall supplemented his books with several articles (listed by Jerry Thompson in the bibliography of *Civil War in the Southwest*, pp. 181–82). Hall's work has provided the impetus for others to reanalyze battles, reevaluate generals, and reassess the

The Civil War in West Texas and New Mexico: The Lost Letterbook of Brigadier General Henry Hopkins Sibley. Edited and introduction by John P. Wilson and Jerry Thompson. Southwestern Studies Series, no. 108. (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 2001. 193 pp. Halftones, notes, index. \$18.00 paper, ISBN 0-874-04283-6.) *Civil War in the Southwest: Recollections of the Sibley Brigade.* Edited and introduction by Jerry Thompson, foreword by Donald S. Frazier. Canseco-Keck History Series, no. 4. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001. xxv + 195 pp. Maps, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 cloth, ISBN 1-58544-131-7.) *When Texas Came: Missing Records from the Civil War in the Southwest, 1861–1862.* By John P. Wilson. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001. xii + 364 pp. Halftones, maps, tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 cloth, ISBN 0-8263-2290-5.) Joseph G. Dawson III is Professor of History at Texas A&M University, College Station. He teaches courses on the American military, and the Civil War and Reconstruction. He is the author of *Doniphan's Epic March: The 1st Missouri Volunteers in the Mexican War* (University Press of Kansas, 1999) and he served as editor of *The Texas Military Experience* (Texas A&M University Press, 1995).

significance of the struggle between northern and southern forces for the control of New Mexico and lands farther west.

Donald S. Frazier wrote an excellent survey of events in *Blood and Treasure: Confederate Empire in the Southwest*.³ Going beyond tactical matters, Frazier emphasized the potential for the slaveholding republic to stretch its boundaries toward the Pacific Ocean. Opportunity beckoned. Had Sibley's modest forces won victories and gained control of New Mexico Territory in the war's early months, they could have lifted southern morale and possibly increased chances for European recognition of the Confederacy, but the general was not up to the task. While conducting his research, Frazier discovered a series of articles written by four soldiers who served with Sibley's brigade. Published in a little-known Texas newspaper, the *Overton Sharp Shooter* in the 1880s, the accounts by veterans P. J. Clough, Phil Fulcrod, W. P. Laughner, and William Davidson added valuable details and revealed a more well rounded picture of both Sibley and his campaign.

Dominated by Davidson's accounts (nine of the eighteen chapters), *Civil War in the Southwest* is carefully edited by Jerry Thompson and is a prize source on the war in New Mexico. These pieces will remind readers how some Civil War veterans enjoyed making overdrawn statements comparing their own battles with other famous ones such as Marathon and Thermopylae (pp. 45, 84), the Alamo (p. 45), and the Charge of the British Light Brigade at Balaclava during the Crimean War (p. 47). These veterans were given to overstatements about the number of casualties suffered by Federals and Confederates in New Mexico (pp. 48, 59), errors that Thompson corrects. On the other hand, the veterans pointed out how Rebels and Yankees cared for each other's wounded and mutually respected Union colonel E. R. S. Canby (pp. 72, 99). The veterans' negative references to General Sibley demonstrate that his reputation cannot be rehabilitated (for examples, see pp. 42, 63, 89). William Davidson also renders a brief but fine characterization of southern soldiers' willingness to bend military rules and regulations to suit themselves: "But the Confederate soldier is no fool and while he would observe orders, he sometimes prepared to act for himself. . ." (p. 121). Supplemented by clear maps, Thompson's superlative job of annotating the recollections gives readers information and background on every person, place, and event that the veterans mentioned. The publication of the *Sharp Shooter* essays complements another work edited by Thompson, *Westward the Texans: The Civil War Journal of Private William Randolph Howell*.⁴

Soldiers' recollections vary in their usefulness, but historians agree that vital to the study of the Civil War is the U.S. War Department's magnificent

collection, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (OR).⁵ However, when they examined the records pertaining to New Mexico and the Southwest, historians and researchers were disappointed to find gaps in the compilation. The OR lack details regarding the Southwest in contrast to its extensive coverage of the East and other theaters. Historians who followed Martin Hall in writing about the Civil War in New Mexico have sought additional materials that would fill in the pieces of the story missing from the OR. Since 1960, diligent researchers, including John P. Wilson and Jerry Thompson, have turned up scattered documents held in private hands and in various archives, and combed through contemporary newspapers. Their searches have produced dozens of items that were not included in the OR. War Department staff assigned to the project may not have found some obscure documents during the years that they assembled the series, or they may have deleted some items due to their lack of appreciation of the southwestern campaigns. Some items may have been inadvertently left out or put aside due to space limitations. In his additional research, Thompson drew upon materials he found for his thorough biography, *Confederate General of the West: Henry Hopkins Sibley*.⁶ After years of further investigations, Wilson and Thompson have produced two worthwhile volumes of documents and records that students and historians are sure to welcome. These works help to fill the gaps in the OR.

In *When the Texans Came*, Wilson has collected 282 documents (almost equal in number to items in the OR) pertaining to New Mexico and Arizona. Readers will not be stunned by revelations or startled by crucial facts so significant that they will drastically change the conclusions in the best studies of the battles in New Mexico, such as works by John Taylor, *Bloody Valverde: A Civil War Battle on the Rio Grande, February 21, 1862*; Thomas S. Edrington and John Taylor, *The Battle of Glorieta Pass: A Gettysburg of the West, March 26–28, 1862*; and Don E. Alberts, *The Battle of Glorieta: Union Victory in the West*.⁷ Documents included in Wilson's collection confirm that the Federals had only a few hundred soldiers available to defend the Southwest and that the Union was fortunate to have an able officer, Col. E. R. S. Canby, as its commander in New Mexico. On the other hand, if Pres. Jefferson Davis had high hopes for Confederate success in New Mexico, the documents in Wilson's collection also confirm that the Confederacy entrusted its venture in the Southwest to a leader of questionable competence—Henry Hopkins Sibley. To gather the documents included in *When the Texans Came*, Wilson raked through the complex and gargantuan record groups in the National

Archives. He draws numerous items relating to New Mexico and Arizona from the War Department Collection of Confederate Records (Record Group 109) and from others such as the Military Department of New Mexico, the Headquarters Records of Fort Union, New Mexico, and various records from the District of New Mexico and its subdivisions—all filed in Record Group 393. He also located several valuable sources in newspapers from the 1860s. Among the more intriguing documents are those related to Lt. Col. John R. Baylor, for a brief time Confederate governor of Arizona. Like General Sibley, Baylor was a poor choice as either a civil or military leader. Baylor strained civil-military relations to the point that President Davis practically revoked his commission and reduced him to the standing of a private soldier. The documents related to Baylor will allow other students to assess this controversial figure and his actions in Arizona. Wilson meticulously indexes his collection, giving researchers easy access to all of the documents. In addition, he provides a helpful introduction and annotations, and attaches a comprehensive bibliography.

Wilson and Thompson team up to edit another intriguing primary source, *The Civil War in West Texas and New Mexico: The Lost Letterbook of Brigadier General Henry Hopkins Sibley*. Sibley's letterbook was obtained by Lt. Timothy D. Nettles, an artillery officer serving with the expedition, either during or after the war. The letterbook contains 147 letters, only eight of which are in the OR (sixty-one of the letters are Sibley's). The letterbook's contents permit a better understanding of how Sibley "organized his small army" (editors' introduction, p. 12), selected some of his officers, and obtained weapons for his expedition. The correspondence and orders contained in the letterbook relate mostly to administrative matters and to developments and activities prior to the start of the expedition. These items are the kinds of details assisting students and scholars in studying the inner workings of any military outfit but, in this case, corroborate the free hand Sibley exercised and the burden of command he carried. Moreover, some researchers will find answers to nagging questions about persons and events related to the Sibley expedition, such as the puzzling movements, whereabouts, and route of a Federal wagon train under the supervision of a Confederate sympathizer, William Kirk.

Historians and students will welcome the individual volumes. Taken together they greatly strengthen the source base for studying the Civil War in the Southwest. The editors' efforts—diligent research, informative annotations, and useful bibliographies—will benefit the work of other researchers for years to come.

Notes

1. Martin Hardwick Hall, *Sibley's New Mexico Campaign* (1960; reprint, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000).
2. Martin Hardwick Hall, *The Confederate Army of New Mexico* (Austin, Tex.: Presidential Press, 1978).
3. Donald S. Frazier, *Blood and Treasure: Confederate Empire in the Southwest*, Texas A&M University Military History Series, no. 41 (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1995).
4. Jerry D. Thompson, ed., *Westward the Texans: The Civil War Journal of Private William Randolph Howell* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1990).
5. U.S. Department of War, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1880–1901).
6. Jerry D. Thompson, *Confederate General of the West: Henry Hopkins Sibley* (1987; reprint, College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1996).
7. John Taylor, *Bloody Valverde: A Civil War Battle on the Rio Grande, February 21, 1862* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995); Thomas S. Edrington and John Taylor, *The Battle of Glorieta Pass: A Gettysburg of the West, March 26–28, 1862* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998); and Don E. Alberts, *The Battle of Glorieta: Union Victory in the West*, Texas A&M University Military History Series, no. 61 (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1998).