Civil War to the Bloody End: The Life and Times of Major General Samuel P. Heintzelman (review)

James Pohl

Southwestern Historical Quarterly, Volume 111, Number 2, October 2007, pp. 238-239 (Review)

Published by Texas State Historical Association
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/swh.2007.0112*

Civil War to the Bloody End: The Life and Times of Major General Samuel P. Heintzelman. By Jerry Thompson. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006. Pp. 464. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. ISBN 1585445355. $35.00, cloth.)

Owing to the circumstances of his birth and early life, one might not ordinarily expect Samuel Peter Heintzelman to become a soldier in the United States Army. Born in the picturesque town of Manheim in the heart of German Lutheran Pennsylvania, his early interests were elsewhere. His lifelong enthusiasms included opera, the fine arts, Shakespearian drama, belles lettres, poetry, and theological and philosophical theory, all of which would seem to be more conducive to following other paths. Nevertheless, when the opportunity for a fully funded education came his way by an appointment to the United States Military Academy, he seized it. He owed the honor to his congressman, James Buchanan, who later became the fifteenth president of the United States.

The small, frail, and barely seventeen-year-old Heintzelman, who was described in his nomination as "the son of a very respectable German" and "intelligent beyond what I would have expected from a boy his age" (p. 3), arrived at West Point with misgivings. Despite its alien atmosphere, where novels and poetry were forbidden, he comported himself with dignity and by dogged determination and perseverance managed to graduate seventeenth in a class of forty-two, all the while avoiding athletic rigors in favor of the flute and chess. He got along reasonably well with his new acquaintances, including those who would play a major role as military enemies in his future—Robert E. Lee, Leonidas Polk, Albert Sidney Johnston, Joseph E. Johnston, and Jefferson Davis.

In early childhood, Heintzelman lost his mother, and his benevolent father died in his third year at the academy. Restrictions were such that he could not attend his father's funeral; it was more than a year before he could view his parent's grave. The rigor of his academic life allowed little time for mourning, and he was more determined than ever to perform creditably. Upon graduation, he hoped for an assignment with the topographical engineering corps, but his grades, as good as they were, did not permit the ambition. Instead, he found himself in the infantry although an engineering position ultimately opened up for him.

Thus it was that he spent years of service in the chill of the Lake Huron country and the heat of Texas and Arizona. There was some relief from the weather extremes in San Diego, California, where he also dabbled in real estate investments. Throughout his life he entered into a number of unrewarding entrepreneurial ventures in gold and, especially, silver mining. All the while, he served his country fighting against Indians and later in the war with Mexico. In both instances he performed well.

His service in the Civil War began propitiously enough with the command of the Third Corps in the Army of the Potomac during the Peninsula campaign. Here he came to admire Joe Hooker, Philip Kearny, and Dan Sickles. His initial admiration of George McClellan declined, and, ultimately, he would be critical of his commander's judgment in his appearance before the committee to investigate the conduct of the war. Heintzelman's career took a downward turn upon assuming the defense of Washington state.

Banished to the West, he supervised prisoner-of-war camps and reported on Copperheads. During Reconstruction he was only somewhat effectual against unreconstructed rebels in Texas, partly because of his politics. "They can't make me a radical" (p. 308), he once defiantly asserted. Retirement soon followed.

This well-written and well-researched book has the merit of being both a life and a times biography. Professor Thompson should be congratulated for his performance.

Texas State University–San Marcos JAMES POHL

Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War. By Nicholas Lemann. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006. Pp. 270. Note to readers, prologue, notes, note on sources, index. ISBN 0374248559. $24.00, cloth.)

Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War is a thoroughly researched and well-written account of the violence that plagued Mississippi during the final days of Reconstruction. Lemann reminds his readers that the Civil War did not end with the surrender of Robert E. Lee's command at Appomattox but rather continued for another decade in the guise of a guerilla war. During the years between 1865 and 1875, leaders of the Democratic Party throughout the South effectively used terrorist groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan, Red Shirts, and White Liners, to bring Reconstruction to an inglorious end. With terrorists serving as a paramilitary arm of their party, Democrats not only gained control of the South in the mid-1870s, but they also ensured that African Americans would be relegated to a position of second-class citizenry. As some historians have eloquently put it, the northern states won the war but lost the peace.

In order to place Mississippi in the context of the broader South, Lemann begins his study by detailing the events that took place on Easter Sunday 1873 in Colfax, Louisiana. Here ex-Confederates and conservative Democrats led a heavily armed militia against the black officials serving in the local government. In gruesome fashion the terrorists killed dozens of black men who vainly attempted to secure their rights of political participation guaranteed to them by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments of the Constitution. The murders committed at Colfax were not unique and only reinforced a message already clear to African Americans and their white Republican allies; white Southerners would use every means necessary to ensure that Reconstruction failed in the South.

Events in Mississippi proved to be just as unsettling as those in Louisiana. Politically, Republicans had enjoyed a measure of success in the state. Mississippi's large contingent of black voters often led to Republican victories in state and local elections, especially between 1868 and 1873. However, Republican successes in state elections only strengthened the resolve of ex-Confederates and Democrats who hoped to regain political control of their state. Lemann convincingly argues that leading Democrats sanctioned the violent actions of the White Line organization, a name given to the domestic terrorists operating in Mississippi. Functioning as a paramilitary arm of the state party, the White Liners pursued a plan of destruction that left thousands of African Americans dead and eventually succeeded in restoring