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Joseph Wheelan, *Terrible Swift Sword: The Life of General Philip H. Sheridan*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2012. Pp. xxiii, 387. ISBN 978-0-306-82027-4.

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In its promotional material for the book, Da Capo Press promises that *Terrible Swift Sword* “explores Sheridan’s life with a depth never before attempted.” This, regrettably, is not the case. Joseph Wheelan, a former journalist and editor,¹ offers rather a light, readable, and generally sympathetic but distractingly flawed treatment of the junior member of the Union Army’s Great Triumvirate. His coverage of Sheridan’s career, especially during the Civil War, is adequate but lacks depth and new insights; the text is also marred by frequent errors.

Wheelan correctly points out that Sheridan has received far less attention than U.S. Grant and William T. Sherman, but writes as if he were exposing him to readers for the first time. A reading of Sheridan’s *Personal Memoirs* made Wheelan realize that he “would make a fine subject for a book” (xi). In fact, Sheridan has received a good deal of scholarly attention.² Wheelan’s popular approach will attract new readers to Sheridan’s story, but does nothing to advance the historiography of his subject. A general audience will enjoy this biography; serious students will find it frustrating to the point of distraction.

After a prologue previewing Sheridan’s signal moment—a stunning victory at Cedar Creek—and placing the man in his proper historical context, Wheelan adopts a generally chronological approach, with a few departures: for example, he covers the Battle of Stones River (29 Dec 1862–2 Jan 1863) before mentioning the Battle of Perryville (8 Oct 1862). He discusses Sheridan’s disputed place of birth, then quickly moves through his childhood, education at West Point, and mundane pre-Civil War career in under eleven pages. The remainder of the first chapter and the next eleven (two thirds of the volume) are devoted to the Civil War period. Chapters 13–17 summarize in varying detail Sheridan’s postwar military career, his role as an official observer during the Franco-Prussian War, and his laudable efforts to protect Yellowstone National Park from exploitation and degradation.

Although Wheelan writes in a lively, often dramatic style, his battle descriptions can be both engaging and frustrating. The absence of battle plans too often renders his many geographical and topographical references useless. The narrative itself flows well, despite a fussy insistence on full rank identifications even for such well known characters as Grant, Sherman, and Custer, and an overuse of nicknames like “Wolverines” (Custer’s Michigan troops). Stressing one of his signature themes—the rise of Total War under Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan—Wheelan details the wanton destruction of Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley: “Philip Sheridan surveyed his awful handiwork with satisfaction. Plumes of black smoke smudged the ... fairytale landscape of rolling green hills and brooks. In places, yellow flames could be seen shooting from a barn’s gambrel roof or racing through a grain field. Distance muted the crackle of burning fires, the crash of barns and outbuildings collapsing in heaps of charred timbers, and the cries of women and children as the blue-coats shot down their livestock” (121).

Wheelan reserves some of his most stirring narration for the Battle of Cedar Creek (19 Oct 1864), when Sheridan, returning from a visit to Washington, made his famous ride from Winchester to rally his army,

1. His previous books include *Jefferson’s War: America’s First War on Terror, 1801–1805* (NY: Carroll & Graf, 2003), *Jefferson’s Vendetta: The Pursuit of Aaron Burr and the Judiciary* (NY: Carroll & Graf, 2006), *Invading Mexico: America’s Continental Dream and the Mexican War, 1846–1848* (NY: Carroll & Graf, 2007), *Mr. Adams’s Last Crusade: John Quincy Adams’s Extraordinary Post-Presidential Life in Congress* (NY: PublicAffairs, 2008), *Libby Prison Breakout: The Daring Escape from the Notorious Civil War Prison* (NY: PublicAffairs, 2010). Wheelan also wrote extensively on the Korean War and its veterans during his time with the Associated Press.

2. See, e.g., Paul Andrew Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army* (Lincoln: U Nebraska Pr, 1985), Roy Morris Jr., *Sheridan: The Life and Wars of General Phil Sheridan* (NY: Crown, 1992), and Eric J. Wittenberg, *Little Phil: A Reassessment of the Civil War Leadership of Gen. Philip H. Sheridan* (Washington: Potomac Books, 2002).

routed earlier in the day, to a stunning victory that confirmed his place as a hero of the Union and assured President Abraham Lincoln's reelection the following month. "Never before had Sheridan's personal magnetism exerted as powerful an influence as it did on this day. His mere presence, cementing the special bond Sheridan had formed with his men during their previous victories over [Gen. Jubal A.] Early, produced an electric, if not magical, effect" (151). While it is generally accepted that the army had recovered sufficiently to avoid complete catastrophe, Sheridan certainly turned a likely defeat into an unlikely victory in a single day.

Wheelan's brief attention to Sheridan's well known magnanimity toward defeated Indians and his crusade to protect and preserve Yellowstone offers pleasant vignettes in a story otherwise steeped in destruction. Other postwar aspects of his life, however, such as his official duties, the final Indian campaigns, and his family life, are handled unevenly with sparse detail. The famous 1877 Nez Perce campaign, for example, is omitted, although it involved Sheridan in a controversy over the rightful distribution of credit for the capture of Chief Joseph's heroic band.

While his assessment of Sheridan the soldier and the man is overwhelmingly positive, Wheelan duly notes his many shortcomings: for example, his heavy-handed administration of Reconstruction Louisiana and Texas. As the author stresses repeatedly, Sheridan produced exceptional battlefield successes, leading from the front and exerting his electrifying persona. During the final year of the war, Sheridan contributed more to the Union victory than any other field commander by defeating J.E.B. Stuart at Yellow Tavern, gaining critical triumphs in the Shenandoah Valley, orchestrating the decisive blow at Five Forks, and outracing Robert E. Lee's army to Appomattox Court House. Wheelan contends that his astute coordination of cavalry and infantry in battle anticipated the armored forces of World War II.³ Throughout, he makes valid points, employing reliable secondary materials and such published primary sources as memoirs and personal correspondence. Oddly, however, he does not indicate archival sources or unpublished manuscript collections. Sheridan's own papers at the Library of Congress are listed under books and articles in the bibliography. And newspaper articles are cited only indirectly from secondary sources.

The treatment of Sheridan's postwar career highlights his central role in the final subjugation of the Indians and his efforts to protect Yellowstone. The favorable interpretation here is backed by strong secondary sources.⁴ Wheelan's only venture into the controversial is his implication that Sheridan, when asked his advice by Chancellor Otto von Bismarck about dealing with French guerrillas during the Franco-Prussian War, unleashed a monster by sharing his total war theories; total war doctrine was, of course, a major component of twentieth-century German war planning, with especially horrific and ghastly consequences under the Nazis during World War II. "Assuredly, Sheridan cannot be blamed. But he planted the seed of an idea with Bismarck and his staff that later bore terrible fruit" (313). Aside from this bold assertion, readers will find little new information or useful research in the book.

The book's decidedly positive presentation of Sheridan may raise eyebrows among readers sympathetic with the pro-Southern, "Lost Cause" narrative or the unsavory characterization of Sheridan as brash, heartless, self-serving, and reckless.⁵ While evaluations of Sheridan's postwar career vary widely, Wheelan takes a measured approach, avoiding excessive praise for so enthusiastic an agent in the conquest of the American Indians.

Unfortunately, this book is riddled with mistakes, ranging from erroneous Confederate military nomenclature (especially, rank designations),⁶ misidentified armies and individuals,⁷ incorrect department or

3. See further my *Sheridan's Lieutenants: Phil Sheridan, His Generals, and the Final Year of the Civil War* (Wilmington, DE: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

4. Including Hutton (note 2 above), Clarence C. Clendenen, *Blood on the Border: The United States Army and the Mexican Irregulars* (NY: Macmillan, 1969), and Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1891* (NY: Macmillan, 1974).

5. See Wittenberg (note 2 above).

6. Wheelan writes that Sheridan was promoted to brigadier general in the regular army in the wake of his victory at Winchester, "making his general rank permanent not brevet" (115). "Brevet" refers specifically to an honorary promotion in recognition of outstanding performance or length of service. Sheridan never held the brevet of brigadier general or major general for that matter; prior to this

division names, and sundry misspellings,⁸ misusages,⁹ and misquotations¹⁰ to errors of fact large and small.¹¹ Also disturbing in a scholarly book is the use of words like “warpath” and “squaw.” While some of the book’s troubling errors and infelicities may be put down to poor copyediting, taken together they convict its author of insufficient familiarity with the intricacies of Civil War history.

Despite its overused title, Joseph Wheelan’s book will provide nonspecialist readers with a lively introduction to General Sheridan’s consequential life—a crisp narrative free of excessive detail. More serious students, however, will be put off by the pervasive errors they encounter as well as the lack of useful maps.¹² In short, despite its appealing elements, *Terrible Swift Sword* is a superficial effort that adds nothing new to our understanding of Philip Sheridan or his place in American history.

promotion, he held a volunteer commission, which was temporary but quite different from a brevet. Wheelan also misidentifies *full* generals Braxton Bragg, E. Kirby Smith, and John B. Hood as *lieutenant* generals (a grade Bragg never held at all).

7. Gen. Henry Davies is identified as “James Forsyth, Sheridan’s chief of staff” (168, photo caption). Describing Gen. Jefferson C. Davis’s murder of Gen. William “Bull” Nelson, Wheelan writes that “Davis had then borrowed a pistol from a bystander and shot Davis [read *Nelson*] in the chest” (29).

8. The name of Confederate general and former US vice president John C. Breckinridge (and of Sheridan’s horse!) is misspelled “Breckenridge” throughout. Accent marks are elided from personal names (e.g., Juárez and Frémont). Confederate Brig. Gen. Williams Wickham is identified as “William Wickham,” Union commander Edward O.C. Ord as “Edward O.S. Ord,” and Charles Town, West Virginia, as “Charlestown.”

9. The definite article is sometimes inserted where it should be omitted (e.g., “Confederate Army of *the* Tennessee”) and omitted where it is needed (“Military Division of [*the*] Missouri”).

10. U.S. Grant referred to Col. R.S. Mackenzie as the “the most promising young officer in the army”—Wheelan omits the operative word “young” (268).

11. Wheelan asserts that Stuart’s “invincibility was all but accepted fact within the army of the Potomac” (74)—after Brandy Station and Gettysburg, this was no longer the case. Nor did Custer “[help] save the Union army during George Pickett’s charge at Gettysburg” (236). The ca. fifty-year-old Kiowa chief Satanta is referred to as “sexagenarian” (244). We read that “[President Benito] Juárez’s forces captured Mexico City and arrested [puppet Emperor] Maximilian” (216), but Maximilian was captured when he was betrayed at Querétaro, north of Mexico City.

12. There are three general campaign maps each for the Civil War and the Indian Wars, but not a single battle map. This makes it very difficult to grasp exactly how important engagements played out on the ground.