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Winston Groom, *Shiloh, 1862*. Washington: National Geographic, 2012. Pp. 446. ISBN 978-1-4262-0874-4.

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The dust-jacket of this book quotes a review in the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* stating that “Groom has established himself unquestionably as heir to the late Shelby Foote...” Although he was much maligned by professional historians, Foote brought a depth of research and insight and a flair for writing to his work that make his Civil War trilogy<sup>1</sup> a mainstay of the historiography of the US Civil War. Prolific novelist<sup>2</sup> and non-fiction writer Winston Groom’s *Shiloh, 1862* pales in comparison not only with Foote’s masterpiece, but most other histories of the battle.

Groom states that his book is meant “to tell a good part of [the] story through the eyes of just a score or so” of the battle’s participants, in whose testimony he finds “sophistication and honesty” (13). More likely, he discovered a treasure trove of diaries and letters and cobbled them together after doing some superficial research on Shiloh and the Western Campaign of 1862. The result is a confusing, often misleading account of a critically important Civil War battle. The narrative, based on a patchwork of quotations, lacks continuity, clarity, and any sense of time and place. It does nothing to disprove U.S. Grant’s claim that “The Battle of Shiloh, or Pittsburg Landing, has been perhaps less understood, or to state the case more accurately, more persistently misunderstood, than any other engagement between National and Confederate troops during the entire rebellion.”<sup>3</sup>

Too many of the book’s direct quotations are simply not germane to the clash of armies in Fraley Field, the farm clearing where the conflagration began, engulfing 100,000 men met in a desperate struggle. Excepting fifteen pages of chapter 2 on the start of the engagement, the Battle of Shiloh does not take center stage till page 188. Instead, we get a long series of stories conveyed by lengthy quotations meant, evidently, to appeal to romantically inclined readers. In one passage, a certain Tom Grafton, having fought a duel over a political dispute, confides to his girlfriend, Josie Underwood, that “I generally take life as it comes to me, and waste no time on self-pity, but tonight I felt so unutterable lonely ... [and] in my loneliness my heart turned to you.” Miss Underwood continues that “he told me—in words I can’t write—that he loved me—also that it was wrong for him to tell me—as he had already offered himself to his state as a soldier, ... and he could not ask any bright young life to be tied to his, but he found he could not leave me without trying for the happiness of winning a little word of love from me” (114-15). All this is a long way from the campaign and battle that ushered the nation into the epoch of modern warfare.

This is followed by quotations pertaining to familial squabbles and tribulations that were representative of what was happening nationwide or to the Union’s move up the Tennessee River that began after the Confederate disasters at Forts Henry and Donelson. Before we come to the battle itself, many pages are devoted to the résumés of the commanders who would lead the troops in combat—Grant, William T. Sherman, A.S. Johnston, P.G.T. Beauregard, and Nathan Bedford Forrest, who recurs as a fixation of the author. Groom accepts the hoary myth of Forrest as the “wizard of the saddle,” stating that, although he lacked any formal military education, “There is much to be said for the suggestion that if he had held higher command sooner the war in the West may have had another outcome” (140). No competent military historian would endorse such irresponsible speculation about the future founder of the Ku Klux Klan.

As the story of the battle unfolds, the myriad of quoted images, though frequently powerful, do not co-

1. *The Civil War: A Narrative*, 3 vols. (NY: Random House, 1958-74).

2. *Forrest Gump* (NY: Doubleday, 1986).

3. *Memoirs and Selected Letters* (NY: Library of America, 1990) 247.

here in any distinct narrative of the battle. A better historian would make more judicious (and sparing) use of participants' accounts, mainly to enliven the battle story with color or reveal the context of specific events. As it is, the book's surfeit of quotations obscures rather than clarifies the actions of leaders and men on the battlefield at Shiloh. For example, in chapter 8, in a description of the retreat of Brig. Gen. Benjamin A. Prentiss's 6th Division, which was holding Grant's left flank astride the Eastern Corinth Road, Groom quotes George W. McBride, a private in the 15th Michigan regiment, who relates that the Michiganders arrived at the front just northeast of Spain Field without ammunition and then fled in the face of Brig. Gen. Adley Hogan Gladden's Confederate Brigade. Groom adds "Thus, the collapse of Prentiss's line was complete" (216), omitting altogether the many other factors that caused Prentiss to abandon the southern perimeter of the Union encampment.

The author perpetuates a number of other durable misconceptions in his discussion of the intensity of firepower that Civil War infantry could deliver. Specifically, he parrots the common re-enactor's fallacy that infantrymen using muzzle-loading rifles were "able to load and fire three aimed shots a minute" (217). This may have been true on training grounds, but certainly not on actual battlefields, where fear, inertia, and the fog of war slow everything down. The author also believes Capt. Andrew Hickenlooper's Federal battery achieved a rate of "one shot fired by each gun every 30 seconds or so" (212) against Gladden's brigade. In fact, Civil War artillery pieces on average fired one aimed projectile every three to four minutes. Groom has drawn too confidently on unreliable eyewitness accounts without having done sufficient historical research into the subject.

Groom also seriously misinterprets tactics, for example, in stating that Col. Thomas Jordan, Beauregard's chief of staff, used Napoleon's order of battle in preparing the attack formation for the impending battle. In fact, he used it to create not a battle plan, but simply an order of battle—the pre-battle dispositions of corps, divisions, and brigades. Furthermore, Groom, like other southern historians, paints Beauregard as a slavish adherent of Napoleon's military axioms. In reality, both Union and Confederate officers had been thoroughly indoctrinated in the methods of Napoleonic-era warfare—men marching abreast in parallel columns so their commanders could direct them on the field and effectively concentrate their firepower on enemy forces. Only in 1864–65 were steps taken to alter the old tactical paradigms in order to counteract the intense firepower of rifled musketry and artillery in defensive positions. These lessons were not entirely absorbed, especially in Europe, before the middle part of First World War.

The most poignant words in Groom's work reflect his service in the Vietnam War: "Experienced combat soldiers know that fortitude is tied directly to their comrades in arms, and that what compels them to persist in an otherwise perfectly insane act is a combined feeling of allegiance to, and fear of humiliation by, their fellow soldiers" (282–83). This sentiment is a constant in interviews with veterans of all of America's conflicts since the Civil War.

Groom too often espouses the same tired, debatable interpretations that have plagued so many histories of Shiloh. His description of Braxton Bragg's emotions as he watched Brig. Gen. Leonidas Polk's withdrawal from Dill Branch (333) is true to neither his character nor his demeanor. And his otiose speculation as to whether Forrest could have mounted a credible night attack on Grant's Last Line and Pittsburg Landing (338) before Buell crossed the river in strength merits no place in a serious work of history.

The book suffers, too, from an accumulation of smaller errors. Mistaking the decimated 6th Mississippi, which suffered just under 71 percent casualties, with the 6th Tennessee is not a major flub in itself, but is especially regrettable since the 6th Mississippi's casualty rate was the fourth highest of any regiment during the Civil War. The confusing of the Iowa and Illinois memorial illustrations betrays an ignorance of the physical geography of Shiloh National Military Park.

Taken together, the book's errors of fact and interpretive flaws bespeak a deficiency of careful research, sound insights, and, in many cases, even simple accuracy. For this reason, I advise readers interested in the Battle of Shiloh to start with works by Shelby Foote or O.E. Cunningham.<sup>4</sup>

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4. *Shiloh and the Western Campaign of 1862*, ed. Gary D. Joiner and Timothy B. Smith (NY: Savas Beatie, 2009), the best single-volume work on the subject.