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Lisa M. Brady, *War upon the Land: Military Strategy and the Transformation of Southern Landscapes during the American Civil War*. Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2012. Pp. xix, 187. ISBN 978-0-8203-2985-7.

Review by Jonathan Beard, New York City (jb752@caa.columbia.edu).

War upon the Land intends to provide an “extensive analysis of nature’s role in that pivotal moment in American history” (3) that was the Civil War. Lisa Brady (Boise State Univ.), the associate editor of the prestigious scholarly journal *Environmental History*, examines three campaigns through the lens of the environment: the Union attacks that led to the fall of Vicksburg and control of the Lower Mississippi in 1863; Gen. Philip Sheridan’s ravaging of the Shenandoah Valley in the summer and fall of 1864; and finally, Gen. William T. Sherman’s (in)famous march to the sea through Georgia and South Carolina in late 1864. All these campaigns have been well studied in countless books, but Brady may be the first who virtually ignores such things as battles, generals and their tactics, the role of enslaved and free blacks, and casualties to concentrate on the obstacles the environment placed in the path of Union troops, the methods they used to overcome them, and the impact the war had upon particular features of the land.

Brady begins with a long introduction rehearsing her arguments and providing a short literature review of environmental history with a glossary of terms from that discipline. These will be essential for readers of more conventional military history, who will likely be unfamiliar with the scholars Brady cites and the specialized vocabulary¹ (or, less kindly, jargon) she uses. Her theses are clearly spelled out:

By taking this approach, I believe we can take a crucial step toward understanding the Civil War more completely. I have chosen the American Civil War, not because other scholars have not done justice to it but rather to illustrate the fundamental importance nature has in shaping human decisions even in cases where other issues seem to take precedence. Any war could serve as the subject of this study (and I hope every war will be analyzed in such a way), but the very nature of the Civil War as the first modern war provides unique insight into a nation in transition culturally, economically, politically and environmentally.... My primary purpose here is to use the war as a window through which we can better see a critical element in the nation’s environmental history: that is, how nineteenth-century Americans perceived their natural environment and their place in it. What I discovered is that notions of improvement, control, and wilderness evolved during the war even as they maintained semblances of continuity with their antebellum predecessors. The war did not upend Americans’ relationships with or ideas about nature but instead provided the rationale for broadening them to include nature protection at the national level. (4-5)

This goes beyond a traditional military historian’s statement that, for example, “Union troops laid waste to the farms between Winchester and Staunton as they moved south.” Southern farmers had cleared their fields of trees and brush, and maintaining these improvements involved constant work. In addition, they had created new ecosystems by clearing land, planting crops, and introducing livestock. But Brady fails throughout to demonstrate convincingly two of her major ideas: that Union armies destroyed the human-created landscapes of the South and that nature itself was an agent in the war.

Brady does show that, by first taking whatever food they could seize, then shooting the remaining livestock and burning crops, barns, fences, and implements, Federal troops indeed laid waste to the agricultural regions of the Shenandoah Valley, as well as the parts of Georgia and South Carolina in Sherman’s path. But that was all. They did not destroy these “agroecosystems”: “for most of the South, the destruction of crops elicited only temporary consequences. Sherman did not literally destroy the land. He did not salt the earth,

1. E.g., the neologism “agroecosystem” instead of “farm.”

as [Gen. Henry] Halleck suggested he do. Nor did his men poison wells, as they were accused of doing” (125).

Indeed, even before the end of the war, Confederate soldiers or deserters returned to their lands and began repairing the damage and planting the next year’s crops. A heavier blow for the South was the sheer loss of agricultural manpower: hundreds of thousands of white men died or were crippled, while even more black men and women fled farms and plantations in search of greener pastures. In addition, Brady does not extend her study beyond the end of the war to show, for example, that the Shenandoah Valley or Sherman’s route through Georgia was still a “wasteland” in 1866.

The book’s other leading idea is a major tenet of environmental history: that nature is an active player, not a merely passive canvas upon which human actors paint the past. Brady accordingly provides abundant examples of the obstacles nature placed, for instance, in Grant’s way in the Mississippi Valley. But there is nothing new here: she has simply culled quotations from the same soldiers’ diaries and letters that many others have used in writing more traditional histories.

Sometimes Brady’s arguments fall especially flat. After taking Atlanta, Sherman’s army continued toward the port of Savannah and the sea. Brady describes at length the natural barriers around Savannah: the surrounding swamps and rice fields limited Sherman’s army to a few narrow causeways that the Confederates could easily defend. In addition, this “hydraulic landscape” provided no forage for Union troops. But, in the end, Sherman’s men marched into Savannah dry-shod, after Confederate forces fled rather than face a siege. Similarly, though Brady emphasizes the problems that South Carolina’s sandy soil and high water table posed for Sherman a few weeks later, it was the absence of human defenders that ensured he would reach Columbia.

In summary, although *War upon the Land* is well written, carefully annotated, and consistently candid, Brady’s environmental lens fails to bring any important or novel features into sharper focus.