



The Bonfire: The Siege and Burning of Atlanta

Marc Wortman

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The destruction of Atlanta is an iconic moment in American history—it was the centerpiece of *Gone with the Wind*. But though the epic sieges of Leningrad, Stalingrad, and Berlin have all been explored in bestselling books, the one great American example has been treated only cursorily in more general histories. Marc Wortman remedies that conspicuous absence in grand fashion with *The Bonfire*, an absorbing narrative history told through the points of view of key participants both Confederate and Union.

The Bonfire reveals an Atlanta of unexpected paradoxes: a new mercantile city dependent on the primitive institution of slavery; governed by a pro-Union mayor, James Calhoun, whose cousin was a famous defender of the South. When he surrendered the city to General Sherman after forty-four terrible days, Calhoun was accompanied by Bob Yancey, a black slave likely the son of Union advocate Daniel Webster. Atlanta was both the last of the medieval city sieges and the first modern urban devastation. From its ashes, a new South would arise.

The Bonfire: The Siege and Burning of Atlanta Details

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From Reader Review The Bonfire: The Siege and Burning of Atlanta for online ebook

Matthew says

Most of the book is actually about the history (beginning and burning) of Atlanta which is interesting, but makes the title rather misleading...While two chapters are devoted to the bonfire(s) I think we get all of two sentences in each chapter about them...hmmmm...rather disappointing. The most surprising thing (according to Wortman) is that its not as bad as history has portrayed it, and there were actually TWO fires: The first set by Confed. Gen. Hood's forces as they flee, and the second by Sherman after he leaves...both are barely mentioned. Was the burning of Atlanta not the ruthless destruction portrayed by historians for years? And, if that's the case...why title your book "Bonfire"?

Jimmy says

From the subtitle, I was expecting the book to focus on the last part of the Atlanta Campaign and the battles near the city. However, less than half the book even covered the Atlanta Campaign, and this section gave almost as much coverage to the civilians' experiences as to the military operations (which I was more interested in). All of the maps were at the start of the book, none of which showed individual battles.

The first half of the book covered the *entire* pre-war history of Atlanta, from the early frontier settlement of northwest Georgia through the city's role in the first three years of the Civil War. While not badly written, I don't see what it had to do with the military operations around the city during July to September 1864.

Delway Burton says

As a native of Atlanta, I have often wondered why my home was different from all other southern cities. It has no natural resources, it is not on a body of water, it had no manufacturing base, yet from its founding in 1841 (the Cherokees and Creeks were expelled 1838), it had grown into the key to a Union victory only 20 years later. The foundations of its personality are in its location (a bit of geographical happenstance) and the people who were attracted for the opportunities it offered. It was a city of the deal. Why did Atlanta become a center of the African-American middle class and education institutions? The Atlanta mayor in 1861 was a relative of John C. Calhoun, yet he, along with many business leaders, was against secession. Have you ever heard of the gunfight between Atlanta's sheriff and his rival on a busy downtown street? Did you know that as a young soldier, William T. Sherman, had spent most of his career in the South? There are dozens of other historical anecdotes and coincidences, and Mr. Wortman does an excellent job of using personal histories and accounts to enliven his story.

The reading can be a bit dry in places, such as the various arguments and factions for and against secession, but it is a must read for any Civil War fan.

Lee says

Great history read. It is a little slow to get going but builds steam (much like the forces of war that eventually roll over Atlanta) into an engaging read. (Give it a few chapters). This book really places the growth of the city in a broader historical context. You'll find it interesting even if you are not a Civil War buff but are interested in the history of one of the largest American cities. And it is a rich history that's unique to other major cities and filled with nuance and details that defy many of the modern stereotypes and common thoughts about Atlanta, the South, and the Civil War. Like all conflicts, things are never as clearly divided as they appear on either side, but what is a clear from this recount is what a tragic and devastating mistake the war was for the country. Yet despite the awful costs, Atlanta, in keeping with American ethos, rebuilt and grew bigger. Ultimately, the story of the burning of Atlanta is an American story - and worth reading for anyone interested in our nation's historical tapestry.

Jocelyn Green says

I have read dozens of books on Civil War Atlanta as I researched and wrote my novel, *Yankee in Atlanta*. *The Bonfire*, by Marc Wortman tops them all. This masterful work is distinguished by its spellbinding narrative, comprehensive context, and critical but lesser-known history surrounding the Atlanta home front as well as the military campaign for the city. My copy is underlined, dog-eared, highlighted and bracketed. As a historical novelist, this book was a dream-come-true type of resource. Highly recommended for anyone interested in the Civil War.

Mike DiFilippo says

Personal and regional history of Atlanta from it's origins as plundered, sacred Indian lands to it's very rapid growth as the railroad "heart" of the South, through the booming early Civil war years to it's final battles and destruction at the hands of General Sherman. Quite a story from hundreds of personal diaries, newspapers, war records and first hand accounts of civilians, bondsmen and soldiers of both sides. Great read.

Brent says

This amazing book tells a larger series of stories, starting with biographies of personalities including Civil War Mayor Calhoun, and the settlement and resettlement conflicts with Creek, Cherokee, and Seminole peoples. All is told briefly and winningly. William T. Sherman, as a young man, was part of the Indian removal and survey, and so, at end here, he is again in the American West. Yet, to tell such large arcs of story, much is truncated and elided, though the primary-source quotations are well and thoroughly chosen. For example, in summarizing Cherokee and Creek conflicts, their historic entrance upon the Southeastern scene, for space reasons but leaving an impression of haste, and the Allatoona Pass battle in retrograde, after the Battle of Atlanta, does not appear.

Never mind these cavils; highly recommended.

Nick Black says

initial reaction: vivid, but could have been much more substantial. chapters clocked in at right around 16 pages per, with a dearth of footnotes. occasional drifts into straightaway, undelimited conjecture. full of great new facts and anecdotes, but i'm undereducated in this area and can't evaluate such yet.

!!! My various sources of publishing intelligence sure dropped the collective ball here! Acquired upon sight, Amazon, 2009-08-29. *The destruction of Atlanta is an iconic moment in American history—it was the centerpiece of Gone with the Wind. But though the epic sieges of Leningrad, Stalingrad, and Berlin have all been explored in bestselling books, the one great American example has been treated only cursorily in more general histories. Marc Wortman remedies that conspicuous absence in grand fashion with The Bonfire, an absorbing narrative history told through the points of view of key participants both Confederate and Union. Atlanta was both the last of the medieval city sieges and the first modern urban devastation. From its ashes, a new South would arise.* THAT'S RIGHT WE HOLD IT DOWN FOR THE DIRTY SOUTH! ATL, baby, ATL! excitement!

Rob says

Maintaining a close focus on the city of Atlanta, The Bonfire differs from other Civil War histories. The wider Civil War is excluded from view, and the battles are only mentioned when they directly affect the city.

I quite enjoyed the snapshot of antebellum (and intra-bellum) Southern society, without any cloying admixture of "Lost Cause" or "states rights" rhetoric. Sherman's statements at the end sum it up-- paraphrased: "The war had to be fought, because the principles of slavery were incompatible with the freedom that was the foundation of our democracy. Slavery had to be abolished". I'd obviously understood that slavery was racist, but many of the specific cruelties elucidated were new to me.

One also felt sympathy for the citizenry of Atlanta during the wartime siege, but again, Sherman: "War is cruelty, and you cannot refine it."

Tim says

I have traveled through Atlanta historian Franklin M. Garrett's multi-volume work on the history of Atlanta; but Marc Wortman's book is much more focused in its scope and is a masterful exploration of the primordial roots to the founding, growth, and destruction of the City of Atlanta.

I have toured many of the regional battlegrounds and historical sites to discover Atlanta's past and Georgia's roots. Wortman's writing, however, enlivens the area's economic, societal, cultural, and political foundations as witnessed through the eyes of several individuals. He knits together upstart business, economic chicanery, and political strife as witnessed through primary characters that include: William Tecumseh Sherman; James Calhoun, cousin to Southern firebrand John C. Calhoun and the long-suffering mayor of Atlanta; Robert Yancey Webster, illegitimate son of Daniel Webster and clever entrepreneur; Samuel P. Richards; Cyena Stone; as well as rendering short reflections on military commanders, a few soldiers, and several scalawags.

What are quite intriguing are the inaugural travails of early settlers within Georgia and the struggles of early immigrants against the numerous Indian uprisings, conflicts and dispersals. Workman portrays the region's early development that grows very naturally, organically—especially reflected in the maturing national political dissension and separatist fervor—and he paints a very compelling picture for the reader to understand a Civil War match point bursting in one city's conflagration.

There are plenty of military operations drawn here, although the intention was not to concentrate merely on Sherman's strategic military achievements. This work shows the underbelly of war as presented through its impact and suffering of civilians and soldiers. The buildup to Atlanta's burning is considerably extensive but a brief review of the aftermath and the Gate City's rise from ashes fosters the hopeful portrait of the City that will rise again.

Workman's two-page "Acknowledgments" section reveals the incredible research that supports this book. He thanks museums, archives, and libraries—both public and private collections—that evidence his efforts. Certainly the 50 pages of copious endnotes for each chapter suggest more extensive and elaborate study of the material.

This is a worthy read for anyone interested in American history, especially concentrating on the War of Northern Aggression, as it has been termed around here. Now I have a keener understanding of why those Civil War re-enactors fired off the cannonade a few Saturdays ago—July 21st marks an anniversary for the Battle of Atlanta.

Teechbiz says

I learned a great deal about Atlanta and the famous march.

Mike says

The sub-title is a little misleading. While the book does talk about the siege and burning of Atlanta, that is probably less than 25% of the book. The story begins with the white settlement and Indian clearances in Georgia. Workman then goes on to describe the short history of Atlanta both before the War and in the early years of the War. Follow the fortunes of the Army of Tennessee and the Army of the Tennessee as the Federals make their way to Georgia. Pretty much anything you could want to know about Civil War Atlanta is at least mentioned here. Definitely worth reading, if a bit slow going in the beginning.

Rob says

Great book- background concise, biographies full of detail. I have committed to watching Ken Burns Civil War documentary after finishing this book because the Civil War is that darn interesting. Now where am I going to find the eleven hours to watch the series? Working on it.

Cara says

I'm not normally into Civil War stuff, in part because I associate being into the Civil War with being a middle-aged white male racist pining for better times. It was clearly a war over slavery, but there are still a lot of people who like to gloss over that little fact. I like that Marc Wortman isn't one of these people, and this history of Atlanta from its founding through the end of the war does not omit any of the terrible details of slavery or the fact that Atlanta was founded on land stolen from Native Americans. The title is a bit misleading because the siege of Atlanta is only a small part of this book, but I didn't mind. Only 3 stars from me because even if I've learned that not all Civil War books are written for middle-aged white racists, the Civil War still isn't every interesting. It's a good book for what it is, but if you're not particularly interested in the Civil War you won't suddenly start to care about it after reading this.

Carol says

I am a relatively new resident of Georgia and I am fascinated by stories of the Civil War. It is interesting to note there is a wide disparity in the Civil War history I learned in Pittsburgh and the stories of the Civil War in the South. So I am on a journey to learn both versions and try to understand the truth of what happened. "Bonfire" is well written. Sometimes I got bogged down by all the battles but appreciated having a Northern and Southern point of view. I knew Sherman marched through Atlanta on his march to the sea but I had no idea that Atlanta was under siege for 44 days. There are personal anecdotes that make the story very interesting.
