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## INTRODUCTION

### MORE THAN THE MUD MARCH

The day after Christmas 1862, Union general Ambrose Burnside started planning a bold maneuver to capture the Confederate capital of Richmond. The commander called for his Army of the Potomac to cross Virginia's Rappahannock River on pontoon bridges west of Fredericksburg—a city halfway between Washington, D.C., and Richmond—and move south around the Confederate troops on the other side. From that position, Burnside hoped to squeeze the enemy between his army and the banks of the Rappahannock. With southern forces defeated or on the defensive, Burnside believed he might have an easy path to Richmond. Once there, he would deal the South a blow from which it could not recover. Such an aggressive move might also boost northern morale, which had been at low ebb since a humiliating defeat at Fredericksburg two weeks earlier. Few subordinate officers expressed much faith in Burnside or his plan. At least two generals met with President Abraham Lincoln to say as much, and for a moment, the commander in chief wavered. But when Burnside threatened to resign, Lincoln reluctantly approved the action.

During the first weeks of 1863, Burnside watched the weather. Sunny skies and cool temperatures allowed local roads to dry out and become firm enough for travel. Even a quick cold snap on January 17 seemed to have little effect on his men or his projected path to the Rappahannock. Encouraged by the good weather, the general put his army in motion at noon on January 20. As he approached the river, however, Burnside got word of Rebel troops stationed south of the river in a position he had not anticipated. He decided to delay the crossing for a day while he considered the latest

intelligence. After that, he intended to move his two corps—Burnside preferred to call them “Grand Divisions”—consisting of 75,000 men into position for an attack on Robert E. Lee’s Confederate forces.

Around 9:00 on the night of January 20, just as the first of his men reached the river’s edge, a “cold, heavy, incessant” rain set in along the Rappahannock. At times the rain mixed with snow, and the precipitation did not stop for thirty hours. Driving wind blew down hastily pitched tents. The relentless downpour doused campfires, leaving shivering soldiers no protection against the elements. Gen. Régis de Trobriand recalled that nightfall brought “a funereal aspect, in which the enthusiasm is extinguished.” In short order, the once-firm Virginia roads became a muddy morass of ruts and ditches as impassable as any swamp. Trobriand asserted, “the mud is not simply on the surface, but penetrates the ground to a great depth.” According to one of Burnside’s artillery officers, “The mud was so deep that sixteen horses could not pull one gun.” Wagons stuck up to their hubs, draft animals died from exhaustion, and mules “drowned in the middle of the road.” At least four of the pontoon bridges needed to cross the river remained mired firmly in the muck. Theodore A. Dodge, a soldier in the 110th New York who followed Burnside to the river, explained it this way: “Mud is really king. He sets down his foot and says, ‘Ye shall not pass,’ and lo and behold we cannot.”

Something about the Virginia quagmire proved especially insidious. Dodge could not put his finger on it, but for some reason, he believed, “mud wields a more despotic sway these last two days than I ever saw him wield before.” Unable to go any farther, Burnside’s bedraggled men forlornly returned to their winter camps near Fredericksburg without so much as firing a shot. Meanwhile, on the other side of the river, Lee’s men looked on with glee, posting large signs that read “This Way to Richmond” (complete with arrows pointing in the opposite direction from the capital city) and “Burnside Stuck in the Mud.”

In the aftermath of the fiasco, Burnside blamed “insubordinate” Union officers for his woes and threatened to resign unless Lincoln dismissed the alleged offenders. The officers and their supporters, some of whom coveted Burnside’s command, pointed the finger at the general.

Eventually Lincoln, never enamored with Burnside’s effort in the first place, convinced the general to accept another assignment and entrusted the Army of the Potomac to Joseph Hooker, one of Burnside’s critics. Perhaps better than any other incident, Burnside’s ill-advised “Mud March” demonstrates the indecision, lack of leadership, and internal rancor that plagued the Union high command in late 1862 and early 1863.

For those who write the military history of the Civil War, the Mud March is one place (and sometimes the only place) where the natural world—in the form of rain and bottomless Virginia mud—becomes important to the narrative. Tellingly, it is the only campaign named for a weather-induced feature, rather than a geographic one. The horrendous weather that overtook Burnside has prompted a few scholars to look into the atmospheric conditions that brought on the storm and the soils that so quickly became a quagmire. But most military historians come back to Burnside, citing his overly ambitious plan, his failure to understand the folly of moving troops in winter, and the one-day delay that kept him from crossing the river. Unlike Theodore Dodge and other soldiers who lived through those difficult days in 1863, military historians have been much quicker to note the foibles of General Burnside than to acknowledge the tyranny of King Mud.

Over the last two decades, environmental historians, a group of scholars generally more attuned to the role of nature in human endeavors, have called for a different approach. As Jack Temple Kirby explains it, people are “connected creatures, obligated partners in a dynamic natural community.” Within that community, the natural world always affects any human activity. In turn, human actions, in war or any other enterprise, alter nature. When it comes to the Civil War, some environmental historians have viewed the conflict as a struggle for resources; others have called attention to the health of soldiers, civilians, slaves, and freedpeople. A few have focused on the wanton destruction of the natural and built environments and the ways Americans reacted to the unprecedented devastation. The impact of the war on agriculture, especially in the South as it reorganized after emancipation, has also drawn scrutiny. Lisa M. Brady, one of the first environmental historians to examine the Civil War, has investigated the ways military strategy reflected prevailing ideas about nature and how those ideas influenced individual campaigns.

Even so, we still lack a work that considers the four years of war—the musters, training, troop movements, battles, home front, and aftermath—in an environmental context. This book, a collaborative effort between a military and an environmental historian, is an attempt to write such a history. Simply stated, we have tried to reimagine the war, not just as a military action but also as a biotic or biological event, one crucial to the history of the American environment. Decades ago, Alfred W. Crosby, a pioneer in environmental history, reminded us that human beings are never really alone in the natural world. They live side by side with what Crosby, in a marvelous turn of phrase, called the “portmanteau biota”: the conglomeration of microbes, crops, weeds, and domestic animals that reside in their bodies and on their farms and fields. When Europeans settled on other

continents, Crosby argued, they and their associated organisms were not only colonizers but also agents of biological upheaval that transformed both people and nature. This mass relocation of people, plants, and animals took place in a natural world that was not static but one in which climate, weather, winds, and a host of other factors helped determine the pace and extent of change.

Similarly, we treat the war as an ecological event that not only affected people but also altered natural systems and reshaped the already complex interaction between humans, other organisms, and the physical environment. Such a history requires merging traditional military sources with material from relevant sciences, scholarly territory often unfamiliar to historians. This approach also grants agency to the natural world, not as the sole determinant of events but as a prominent and often neglected actor in a complicated story. As environmental historian Ellen Stroud writes, paying attention to the “material stuff of nature”—rain, dirt, bacteria and viruses, animals, and human bodies—does not mean that one ignores human action and decision-making. Instead, giving equal time to nature provides a new context, a means “of telling better histories,” a way “to bring to light connections, transformations, and expressions of power that otherwise remain obscured.”

Viewed in this context, the “Mud March” becomes much more than a confrontation between Burnside, his officers, rain, and soil. Before he could move on Richmond, the general had to make sure he had adequate provisions to feed his men and that they were healthy enough to embark on a campaign. Likewise, every horse and mule that pulled a wagon or moved artillery toward the Rappahannock had to receive fodder and care. All those plans went awry with the bad weather. The prolonged exposure to the elements and the physical exertion it required weakened the soldiers. Carcasses from the animals that suffocated in the mud had to be disposed of or left to rot, adding to the misery of the rain-soaked camps. Additionally, every man who marched with Burnside already carried within his body various microorganisms that could cause sickness in the right conditions. Those conditions flourished during this cold, wet slog. As a result, disease ran rampant through the dispirited Union ranks, exacerbated by overcrowding, poor nutrition, and poor sanitation. When General Hooker finally took over, he commanded a demoralized and diseased army wrecked by poor human decisions in difficult environmental circumstances. “I do not believe I have ever seen greater misery from sickness than now exists in the Army of the Potomac,” wrote the army’s medical inspector general. One medical officer suggested that the “Mud March” cost as many lives as the Battle of Fredericksburg by the time the illnesses had run their courses. For the rest of their lives, numerous soldiers believed that their chronic joint pain and bowel complaints stemmed directly from

those three frigid, wet, and muddy days along the Rappahannock. Disheartened by their experience, more men deserted the Federal ranks that bleak winter than at any other time of the war.

What is true of the Mud March is true of the war as a whole. Soldiers from rural areas crowded together in training camps, creating a new and inviting environment for the microorganisms living in their bodies. Armies larger than many American cities confronted each other on the confines of the battlefield, bringing to rural areas all the problems of sanitation and waste disposal associated with urban life. Thousands of animals accompanied the troops—horses and mules that moved men, artillery, and supplies, as well as cattle and hogs that provided meat for sustenance. Along with people, the animals were part of a massive mammalian migration that had enormous implications for the natural world. Dead animals and dead people had to be disposed of, sometimes on a massive scale. Peculiarities of terrain often dictated what armies could do, and the armies, in turn, altered the land they occupied. As historian Stephen Berry writes, “The Civil War was a massive stir of the biotic soup, and in many ways *that stir*, more than the battles themselves, was the real story of the war.” It also constituted, we would add, a significant episode in the changing story of the American environment.

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Rethinking the Civil War in these terms immediately presents a problem of chronology. For the humans who fought in it, the Civil War began in April 1861 and ended in April 1865. Key battles and campaigns are easily identifiable. The natural world, however, moves to its own rhythms, influenced but not bound by human notions of time and space. Recognizing that distinction but firmly believing that modern readers prefer linear stories with a beginning and an end, we have made the difficult choice to focus on certain environmental themes during specific seasons of war.

In chapter 1, we examine the health of soldiers in the first six months of the conflict. We explore how the assembly of thousands of troops in preparation for war caused outbreaks of infectious disease, and we delve into the multiple disease environments created by the various campaigns. We also discuss other factors that affected the bodies of the volunteers, such as marching in the summer heat, as well as the quality and quantity of the food and water that soldiers received. In chapter 2 we focus on how the weather of 1862 shaped military campaigns from California to Virginia. Floods emerged in the midst of a decade-long drought, forcing commanders, soldiers, and civilians to make decisions that dramatically affected the direction of the war. We situate chapter 3 in the year from

the summer of 1862 to the summer of 1863 to analyze how both sides provided food for their armies and civilians amid the increasingly destructive conflict. The lack of food influenced the origins and conclusions of campaigns from Antietam to Vicksburg.

Animals take center stage in chapter 4, as we follow the plight of horses, cattle, and hogs from the summer of 1863 through the winter of 1864. These animals provided the engines and protein for the armies, and the war brought suffering, disease, and wholesale death to them just as it did to humans. In chapter 5, we examine the death and disability of soldiers during the spring and summer of 1864—grim seasons dominated by the brutal Overland Campaign in Virginia. The armies struggled for supremacy while confronting myriad problems created by tens of thousands of wounded and dying men. In chapter 6, we look at the various landscapes on which battles took place from the fall of 1864 until the spring of 1865. We examine how terrain influenced the fighting and how battles altered the land, including something as basic as the quest for salt, to monumental military conquests like the capture and destruction of Atlanta. In the epilogue, we discuss the environmental legacy of the war and the ways it continued to shape Americans' relationship with nature after Appomattox.

No organization scheme is perfect. Infectious diseases endured well beyond 1861; turbulent weather did not suddenly stop in 1862; people and animals died long before 1864. With that in mind, we necessarily stretch our chronological parameters, looking forward or backward a bit in each chapter to provide context and complete the story. With more than 50,000 books currently available on the Civil War, we are also keenly aware that no important battle, leader, or tactic has escaped scrutiny from scholars. We make no claim to undiscovered sources or unrecorded events. Instead, what we offer is a more holistic way of thinking about the Civil War, one that did not escape some of the most astute observers of people and nature in the nineteenth century. When Herman Melville sat down to compose a poem about the bloody battle at Malvern Hill along Virginia's James River in July 1862, he turned his attention not to strategy or tactics but the natural world. He took note of surrounding forests where "rigid comrades" lay in death and spoke of the "leaf-walled ways" that allowed for the passage of men, animals, and weapons of war. But Melville also seemed to recognize that, whatever the plans of troops and generals, nature stubbornly went its own way, often oblivious to human designs. "The elms of Malvern Hill," he wrote, "Remember everything / But sap the twig will fill / Wag the world how it will / Leaves must be green in spring." So it is in war, as nature and people influence each other. And so it will be as we examine the events of the Civil War and its

environmental legacy, starting with the illnesses that emerged as thousands of young men flocked to join the great adventure in 1861.