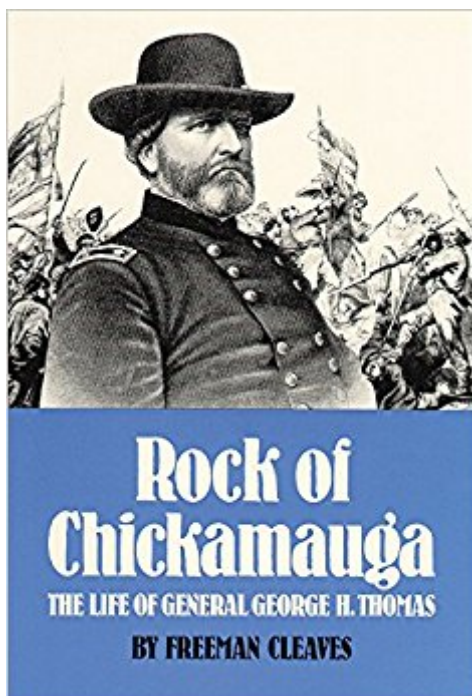


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Rock Of Chickamauga: The Life Of General George H. Thomas



Synopsis

General George H. Thomas, the "Rock of Chickamauga" of the history books, was a Virginian who chose the northern side in the Civil War. While Thomas was considered a traitor by his family, his military superiors regarded him with a certain mistrust because of his southern background. Nonetheless, Thomas was prominent in the battles of Mill Springs, Shiloh, Corinth, Perryville, and Nashville, and was immortalized at Chickamauga, where he tenaciously held the field until ordered to withdraw.

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Customer Reviews

Freeman Cleaves, who is also the author of *Rock of Chickamauga: The Life of General George H. Thomas* (University of Oklahoma Press), was a member of the editorial staff of *Financial World* but his avocation for many years has been research in American history, especially Civil War history. Mr. Cleaves was educated in Bates College, the University of New Hampshire, and Harvard University.

This book was copyrighted in 1948, so it is over sixty years old. Many biographies of that vintage lose value as new information comes to light. However, this volume, authored by Freeman Cleaves, holds up pretty well. I prefer the more contemporary work by Einolf, "George Thomas: Virginian for the Union." For instance, the coverage of the battle at Nashville is much more detailed in the latter. Also, while Cleaves notes Thomas' concern for African-Americans during Reconstruction,

consideration of that is, again, more detailed in Einolf's work. Nonetheless, Cleaves' book stands well on its own after the many years since its appearance. Like standard biographies, the book begins with Thomas' childhood, including his family's avoiding Nat Turner and his associates during their short-lived rebellion. We see his career develop from West Point until the Civil War's end and beyond. Of special moment are the following: his remaining loyal to the Union even though he was a southerner; his first substantial victory at Mill Springs (his decision-making was solid, but still had room for further development), post-Shiloh combat (Corinth and Perryville and Stone's River [or Murfreesboro]). He became a solid commander under William Rosecrans--culminating with his gallant stand as "The Rock of Chickamauga" during that desperate battle. He finally assumed command of an army after Rosecrans' dismissal at Chattanooga, taking over the Army of the Cumberland. Then, the attack on Missionary Ridge; his role in Sherman's march to Atlanta, and--the culminating battle of his career at Nashville. At Nashville, Sherman had sent Thomas some troops; Thomas had to gather together a force from all over the region. Meanwhile John Bell Hood's Army of the Tennessee was marching north into Tennessee. Thomas pulled his various pieces of an army together for one of the most total victories in the Civil War. Then, his post-Civil War career. . . . Again, the book still stands on its own, after so many years. It is surely not the best book on Thomas, but it makes its own contribution.

I was lucky to have read Freeman Cleaves' *Rock of Chickamauga* before I read two other biographies on Maj Gen George H. Thomas. This work is a great introduction to the life and accomplishments of Thomas. I feel it is amazing in that the work holds up extremely well today, some 65 years after it was released in 1948. *Rock of Chickamauga: The Life of General George H. Thomas* Yes, other reviewers are correct in saying that the reader is often left to draw their own conclusions on inferences that Cleaves made. He doesn't come out and say, for instance, that Thomas was furious at Grant over a number of different matters or that he felt Sherman was stupid when he failed to employ Thomas' battle strategy. But, personally, I found I didn't need to be told what Cleaves was getting at. The author did a good job telling of Thomas' role in reconstruction from his command of the Army in many of the Southern states. He was headquartered in Nashville and later in Louisville during the Andrew Johnson Presidency. True, he already had a solid relationship with Johnson because of Thomas' frequent wartime service in Tennessee while Johnson was the military governor of the succeeded state. But unlike Sheridan who was often on Johnson's bad side for enforcing the Radical Republican agenda, Thomas did equally much to protect the freed slaves and battle with the Klan. He simply cleared actions with the Department of War and ostensibly with

Johnson before taking action. It was also interesting to learn of his good relations with the first elected governor of reconstructed Tennessee, William Brownlow and how they cooperated to obtain a quorum in the Tennessee legislature to get the 14th Amendment ratified. Additionally enlightening I found to learn of how Thomas totally refused to engage in a run for the Presidency in 1868. I found two excerpts for remarks by Thomas to be particularly insightful. The first provides a view of how much a proponent of racial equality he had become and the second paints a vivid picture of how he viewed the Southern rebellion. The first quotation is taken from Thomas' speech to the Society of the Army of the Cumberland held in Cincinnati in February 1867. The "two hundred thousand valuable patriots and citizens" Thomas referred to are freed slaves who enlisted in the Army after the Emancipation Proclamation. I consider it quite noteworthy that this native of Virginia, from a slave-holding family came to view the freed slaves as valuable patriots and citizens.¹ " ... We have not only broken down one of the most formidable rebellions that ever threatened the existence of any country, but the discipline of the Army of the Cumberland alone has civilized two hundred thousand valuable patriots and citizens. I have traveled a little since the war was over. Wherever I have been ... I have either seen on the steamboat, engaged in peaceful occupations of merchant sailors, or in the fields along the railroad, engaged in peacefully following the plow and setting an example of industry worthy to be followed by all the country, men innumerable dressed in blue." The second quote is from a letter Thomas wrote to the mayor of Rome, Georgia, after some residents were arrested for displaying the Confederate flag.² "The sole cause of this and similar offenses lies in the fact that certain citizens of Rome, and a portion of the people of the States lately in rebellion, do not and have not accepted the situation, and that is, that the late civil war was a rebellion and history will so record it. Those engaged in it are and will be pronounced rebels; rebellion implies treason; and treason is a crime, and a heinous one too, and deserving of punishment; and that traitors have not be punished is owing to the magnanimity of the conquerors. With too many of the people of the South, the late civil war is called a revolution, rebels are called 'Confederates,' loyalists to the whole country are called d----d Yankees and traitors, and over the whole great crime with its accursed record of slaughtered heroes, patriots murdered because of their true-hearted love of country, widowed wives and orphaned children, and prisoners of war slain amid such horrors as find no parallel in the history of the world, they are trying to throw the gloss of respectability, and are thrusting with contumely and derision from their society the men and women who would not join hands with them in the work of ruining their country. Everywhere in the States lately in rebellion, treason is respectable and loyalty odious. This, the people of the United States, who ended the Rebellion and saved the country, will not permit." I enjoyed reading Cleaves' book more the second

time than the first and recommend it to you without reservation.

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