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Review

SHELBY FOOTE'S CIVIL WAR A classic tale now lavishly illustrated

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Fall 1999

Foote, Shelby *The Civil War: A Narrative (40th Anniversary Edition)*. Time-Life Books, ISBN 783501005

Shelby Foote, the Mississippi-born, currently Tennessee-based novelist and historian became something of a celebrity after his appearances in Ken Burns's PBS television series, *The Civil War*. Foote was enlisted as a narrator because of his exhaustive knowledge of the subject and his reputation as historian extraordinaire, which he secured from the publication of his monumental three-volume work **The Civil War: A Narrative**.

Now Time-Life Books is issuing a 14-volume 40th anniversary edition, illustrated with historical photographs, battle maps, drawings, paintings, and other works of art culled from Time-Life's collection. This is, of course, not the first time a photo narrative of the Civil War has been published. Francis T. Miller's famous ten-volume work, *The Photographic History of the Civil War* (1912), was reissued in 1987, sadly with poor quality halftone reproductions. Ken Burns's companion volume to his PBS series is wonderfully illustrated with period photographs, battle maps, paintings, etc. Yet **The Civil War: A Narrative** offers a unique charm.

Foote has written a very informative introduction to the first volume, giving details of the genesis of his book, especially of his relationship to Random House publisher Bennett Cerf (who originally had commissioned a single volume to be titled *A Short History of the Civil War*). Our author's passion toward his subject produced a work seven times larger than originally planned. The completed text consisted of three volumes, released in 1958, 1963, and 1974, respectively. A predecessor to this edition, brought out in 1991, was a sumptuous three-volume, limited, signed, "Collector's Edition, Bound in Genuine Leather" reissue by the Easton Press, which was published in a red morocco gilt-stamped leather

binding.

The binding of this 40th anniversary collector's edition is of a nice oatmeal-colored paper, with the illustrated dust jackets of the 14 volumes collectively forming a photograph of a Federal infantry drill at a Washington, D.C., camp in early 1862. Foote has written a prologue and epilogue for each book. Foote's approach to the War is weighted toward military matters, although the politics of the conflict are addressed in the process. He deals with the Union and the Confederacy, in both Eastern and Western theaters of the War. The author's literary background makes reading this work so enjoyable, featuring as it does a flowing pace like that of a good novel.

The first volume covers the prelude to the War, notably the perspectives of Presidents Jefferson Davis and Abraham Lincoln, and takes note of the major events of the first ten months, especially the conflicts at Fort Sumter and Manassas. The second volume deals with the first six months of 1862, with special emphasis on Shiloh, the assaults on New Orleans and Memphis, and the famed battle between the *Monitor* and the *Merrimac*. In volume three, Foote focuses on the events of the spring and early summer of 1862, including the campaigns of Stonewall Jackson and George McClellan, activities in the West, and Braxton Bragg's move to Chattanooga. Volume four gives attention to the Second Manassas, the subsequent Confederate invasions of the Northern territories, and Kirby Smith's invasion of Kentucky, with events leading up to the Emancipation Proclamation. In volume five, Foote recounts events of late 1862 and early 1863, with special attention to the battles of Fredericksburg, Walnut Hills, and Murfreesboro, plus Ulysses Grant's bayou ventures.

In addition to the prologues and epilogues which Foote has written expressly for the edition, the inclusion of illustrations distinguishes this Time-Life series from earlier printings.

As a photographic historian, I am always interested in seeing how illustrations -- photographs or not -- are incorporated into a book, especially when the book deals with one subject matter. In examining the first five volumes, I find that there has been a judicious choice of photographs, maps, lithographs, and sketches. Both the black-and-white and color reproductions are very good. Proper crediting of the illustrations' ownership is given at the back of each volume. Many are from the great Meserve Collection and The Library of Congress. However, in not one instance did I notice a credit of the original

photographer or artist, although in some cases the photographer of the copy print is given credit (which could mislead some people to think that the credited person was the maker of the original picture). Therein lies a problem with this 40th anniversary edition of Foote's work. It is unclear whether it was caused by a lack of information or a lack of knowledge about where to find such information.

Aside from that one failing, this 40th anniversary edition is an enjoyable read and a visual delight, whether one is reading it for the first time or once again.

Michael Hargraves has served for 12 years as a cataloguer in the Department of Photographs at the J. Paul Getty Museum in California.