

Stalwart War Hero: Rediscovering The Career And Prose Of Orlando B. Willcox

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Review

STALWART WAR HERO

Rediscovering the career and prose of Orlando B. Willcox

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Scott, Robert Garth *Forgotten Valor: The Memoirs, Journals, & Civil War Letters of Orlando B. Willcox*. Kent State University Press, ISBN 873386280

While Robert Garth Scott's claim that this is "the largest collection of Civil War papers to surface in half a century" may be true, what is certain is that **Forgotten Valor** is one of the most complete, candid, and compelling memoirs to cover the professional military career of an unsung but stalwart war hero. Orlando Boliver Willcox (1823-1907) served for 44 years in the U.S. Army, most notably as a brevet major general during the Civil War.

This massive collection of previously unpublished papers chronicles the military life of an officer who kept meticulous journals, diaries, letters, and copies of his official reports throughout his career. Scott has gathered these sources and produced a stunningly refreshing memoir of an articulate and perceptive man whose writings reveal his military skills, leadership ability, insight, and rather direct sense of humor.

After graduating from West Point in 1843, Willcox served in Mexico with Winfield Scott, chased the Plains Indians in Kansas, and pursued the Seminoles in Florida. Army life in those years was dangerous, lonely, and frustrating, with Willcox observing that "good liquor and good morals are equally scarce." Although this memoir covers nearly five decades of army service, most of the work is related to Willcox's Civil War years. In 1861, at the outbreak of the War, this Detroit native was appointed colonel of the 1st Michigan Volunteer Infantry Regiment. He fought at Manassas, in "one of the best planned but worst fought battles of the Civil War." Willcox was captured there and later received the Medal of Honor for his bravery on that battlefield.

Quickly recognized as a courageous and capable leader, Willcox was rapidly promoted upon his release from a Confederate prison, serving as either a division commander or as commanding general of the Union army's IX Corps for the rest of the War. He and his soldiers fought gallantly at South Mountain, Antietam, Fredericksburg, the Wilderness, Cold Harbor, and Petersburg. While on temporary duty, Willcox also pursued the raider John Hunt Moran in Indiana and fought rebel guerrillas in eastern Tennessee.

His descriptions of army life on campaign, in camp, and in battles are vivid and frank. Even a major general complains about slow mail service, infrequent paycalls, and meddling politicians. Willcox is especially wary of "the heroes of the quill," those moralists, journalists, and critics who have never smelled gunpowder or been acquainted with rebel artillery.

His remembrances of fellow officers are honest and unvarnished, and particularly interesting are his comments about General Ulysses S. Grant. Willcox is also no stranger to controversy and his thoughts on personal and professional difficulties are bracing and fresh. His sense of humor is best revealed in his "treatise on modern war," which is a skewering spoof of military bureaucracy, red-tape, and single-mindedness.

Lengthy, detailed, and heavily footnoted for reference and clarity, **Forgotten Valor** offers a well-crafted look at an intrepid warrior who devoted his life to the army and his heart to his troops.

William D. Bushnell is a freelance writer, reviewer, and instructor at the University of Southern Maine. He lives on an island on the Maine coast.