

Grant At Face Value: An Officer's Odyssey From West Point To Appomattox

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Review

GRANT AT FACE VALUE

An officer's odyssey from West Point to Appomattox

Perret, Geoffrey

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Simpson, Brooks D. *Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph Over Adversity, 1822-1865.* Houghton Mifflin, ISBN 395659949

These are good times for Ulysses S. Grant, whose reputation took a beating a generation ago at the hands of William S. McFeely. My own, admittedly admiring, biography was published in 1997, the first volume of Brooks D. Simpson's book has finally appeared, and yet another Grant bio-graphy, by Jean Smith, is expected next year.

Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph Over Adversity was many years in the making, years during which Brooks Simpson established a reputation as an authority on Grant. The jacket copy proclaims that this is the "definitive" account of Grant's life.

The author, however, has produced a biography that reads much like earlier interpretations, beginning with Grant's own account of his life as a soldier. Grant chose to present himself as a man who, lacking any interest in a military career, was forced into it. Then, for no evident reason, he rose to the top thanks to a combination of good luck and a cool, dispassionate recognition that the Civil War had its own rules and its own demands.

Professor Simpson relates the stories others have told many times -- the unwilling and unhappy West Point cadet, the young lieutenant tested in the Mexican War, the abrupt resignation from the Army in 1852. He recapitulates the well-known stories about Grant being forced to resign on account of drunkenness, without adducing any new evidence to support them.

The heart of this book is, of course, the Civil War. Simpson's description of Grant's successes and failures does not provide the reader with anything much in

the way of new sources or fresh interpretations. Simpson is content, too, to follow Grant in a strictly chronological fashion from start to finish.

The greatest challenge any biographer faces is to reach the inner life of his subject. Sad to say, however, there is no serious attempt at psychological insight in this book. If anything, Simpson's rare comments on the inner life of Grant are diffident and tentative, invariably flagged with a "perhaps" or some similar equivocation. Simpson chooses instead not to stray far from his standard primary sources -- Grant's memoirs and *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* (Southern Illinois University Press), the source for about 40 percent of the footnotes in Simpson's book -- and various secondary sources that have stood the test of time, notably the works of Lloyd Lewis and Bruce Catton. The result is a close reading of the documents rather than a close reading of the man.

For example, there is no serious discussion of Grant's love of poetry; his powerful pictorial imagination (as evidenced by his remarkable, even though untutored, artistic ability); his striking gift for clear, logical thought, a gift both revealed and strengthened by his talent for the higher branches of mathematics.

Similarly, his acute sensitivity to landscape goes unremarked, and, as far as Grant's complicated feelings about war are concerned, Simpson is content to take Grant's assertions of repugnance and horror at face value. His wife, Julia, however, knew better. She had been with him on campaign and aptly observed that Grant "could no more resist the opportunity to fire a gun than a woman can resist bonnets."

The repugnance was undoubtedly genuine and ran deep, but the drama of war was simply irresistible to Grant, who was restless, easily bored, always craving distraction of some kind. That mercurial spirit helped propel him to the top of the army and to the top of American politics. Unfortunately, there is little sense of that spirit at work in Professor Simpson's book, even though great historical figures are never types but are always exceptions. The reader who hopes to find insights here into the nature of Grant's exceptionalism may well feel disappointed.

Simpson appears to have made a conscious decision to take Grant's memoirs as his model. In some ways, there could hardly be a better choice, but the standard it sets is a daunting one. Certainly Simpson's narrative flows clearly for most of the time. In a serious military history or biography that is far more

difficult to achieve than most readers realize. It must be said, though, that his publisher has let him down in places. There is no map for the Mexican War, an inexcusable omission given the complexity of that campaign and the unfamiliarity that most readers have with the geography of northern and central Mexico.

It must be noted also that Simpson lacks Grant's inner ear, that poetic sense that tells a writer when the language is working for him, and when it's not. As a result, he lapses unwittingly into the demotic of our day and the results are inept and distracting: Grant "kept his cool," "Grant deadpanned," John Rawlins had problems with "personal demons."

More troubling is the misuse of basic military terms and concepts. Simpson appears to believe that any number of infantrymen, engaged in any kind of operation, can be described as "a column." This was not so in the age of linear tactics. He remarks, too, that Grant "had yet to command a force in combat" when he received his commission as a colonel. In Mexico, however, although Grant had no formal command over an infantry unit, he did what good infantry officers are expected to do -- exercise command when and where it was needed. His feats in this regard earned three brevet recommendations.

Similarly, Simpson remarks that in Mexico, "Grant's efforts to gain reassignment to a combat unit failed." This again shows an unfamiliarity with the army, because there can be no doubt that Grant was assigned to a combat unit, the 4th Infantry Regiment.

It is striking, as well, that when slaves such as Dred Scott and William Jones appear, briefly, in these pages, they are referred to as "Dred" and "William" following their initial appearance. Yet after first establishing the full name of, say, Lorenzo Thomas or Leonidas Polk, who also make brief appearances, they are subsequently referred to as "Thomas" and "Polk," not "Lorenzo" and "Leonidas." It would be wrong to read a lot into this kind of insensitivity, but it has no place in modern scholarship.

In the end, what Brooks D. Simpson has produced in the first volume of his biography of Grant is a work offering little that will be new to those already familiar with the Civil War, its battles, and its personalities. Nevertheless, it provides a competent, workmanlike introduction to the subject for the large number of people who come fresh to it every year. Its few errors of fact and

other lapses should be easy to correct in subsequent editions.

Geoffrey Perret is the author of 10 books, mainly in the fields of military history and biography. He is a contributor to American Heritage and Military History Quarterly. His most recent work is a biography of Dwight D. Eisenhower.