

### To Make Men Free: A Novel of the Battle of Antietam

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## Review

**Benson, John**

**Summer 2004**

**Croker, Richard** *To Make Men Free: A Novel of the Battle of Antietam.*  
William Morrow Publishers, \$25.95 ISBN 006055908X

One September day

Novel retells the invasion of Maryland

*The Red Badge of Courage* and *The Killer Angels* set the standard for Civil War fiction. Compared to these giants, most fictional accounts rarely stand up. Those that try usually suffer from an unnecessarily used and/or flawed what-if factor. Others fail to offer memorable characters. **To Make Men Free** contains neither of these pitfalls.

Set around the pivotal battle of Antietam, **To Make Men Free** follows generals Robert E. Lee, George B. McClellan, Thomas J. Stonewall Jackson, J.E.B. Stuart, and President Abraham Lincoln as they organize the Armies for the bloody fall campaign of 1862, all the while wrestling with the slavery issue.

For some reason many, if not most, fictional stories center around the Battle of Gettysburg. **To Make Men Free** centers on the Battle of Antietam fought in Sharpsburg, Maryland on September 17, 1862. On this date, the Army of Northern Virginia, with its back against the Potomac River, and the Army of the Potomac, which had a copy of Lee's battle plans, fought toe to toe inflicting more than 22,000 casualties upon each other. When the smoke cleared, the overmatched Confederates remained standing but were forced to retreat back to Virginia. The swelled ranks of the Army of the Potomac could not deliver the promised knock-out blow. Afterwards President Lincoln removed General George B. McClellan for the final time as Army Commander and issued his controversial Emancipation Proclamation.

Richard Croker, a former writer and producer of television sports-turned documentary filmmaker, has created an interesting story that grabs the reader's

attention from the first page. The Battle of Antietam and the subsequent Emancipation Proclamation transformed the Civil War from a struggle for re-unification to a fight for freedom. While the title falsely portrays the battle as being specifically fought for freedom and the issuance of the proclamation, such misnaming does not add or detract from the overall story. Fictional characters are interesting and well described. Factual leaders, while skewed slightly in one way or another, are generally true to history and fascinating in their makeup. Poetic licensing regarding the thoughts and actions of these leaders is neither overdone nor uncharacteristic. The battle itself is well researched yet not too technical in its presentation. Though the book does not completely deliver on the promise of a story rich in blood, glory, intrigue, mutiny, deceit, jealousy, revenge, nobility, and power it does give a true feel to the characters' personalities and the underlying issues that surrounded the events of that tragic and bloody day.

Every book has its flaws and this one is no different. Croker neglects the positioning of Southern troops at the battle, leaving unaddressed the Confederate forces from their delaying action on South Mountain to the September 17th battle. While this may be of little importance to those familiar with the campaign, it deprives those unfamiliar with the campaign with a reference point for the fighting scenes. Croker may stir-up Lincoln fans by portraying the Great Emancipator as inept and unwilling to brake from the guidance of those unwilling to lead or fight. After the battle's end, Croker avoids a fitting end to the story, at the President's desk when the Emancipation Proclamation is signed, in favor of a drawn out depiction McClellan's removal and the ascendancy of General Ambrose Burnside to overall command.

Those interested in Civil War fiction will be pleased with their investment of time and purchase of **To Make Men Free**. Negatives aside, this book proves that there are untapped authors who have talent and promise. This was a wonderful book and a pleasant surprise.

*John Benson is a Deputy District Attorney, Adjunct Professor of Law, and President of the Bucks County Civil War Roundtable. He often speaks to groups on the causes of the Civil War and conducts High School Tours of the Battle of Gettysburg. He lives with his wife and son in Bucks County Pennsylvania where he is beginning a book on General Winfield Scott Hancock.*