The Fate of War: Fredericksburg, 1862

Timothy J. Orr

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Recommended Citation

Orr, Timothy J. (2012) "The Fate of War: Fredericksburg, 1862," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 3 .
DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.14.3.07
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol14/iss3/6>

Review

Orr, Timothy J.

Summer 2012

Schultz, Duane *The Fate of War: Fredericksburg, 1862*. Westholme Publishing, \$28.00 ISBN 978-1-59416-145-2

A New Light Shines on the Battle of Fredericksburg

Duane Schultz's *The Fate of War: Fredericksburg, 1862* offers readers a window into the lives of people touched by the forces of war, forces unleashed by the December 1862 battle of Fredericksburg. *The Fate of War* is not an academic history, and consequently, it has no discernible argument. In his preface, Schultz pleads with the reader to accept his book as it appears and not judge it according to the rigorous standards of academia. "This is not an academic history," he writes. "It focuses on individuals, not armies; on people, not plans and positions drawn on maps. It is a narrative about how soldiers and civilians react to the stress of war; a record of triumph and failure, courage and cowardice, compassion and cruelty" (vi).

Essentially, *The Fate of War* moves from character to character, offering brief glimpses of their pre-war lives, their experiences during the battle, and how they endured the battle's grim aftermath. The reader will get a dose of many notable characters: Sergeant Thomas J. Plunkett, nurse Clara Barton, poet Walt Whitman, General Robert E. Lee, Major General Ambrose Burnside, Brigadier General Thomas Meagher, Private William McCarter, Major General Joseph Hooker, Major General William Franklin, Lieutenant General James Longstreet, Lieutenant General Stonewall Jackson, Brigadier General William Barksdale, and a few other names too numerous to mention.

It is hard to assess this book's scholarly merits as it offers no original research and no thesis, and the author readily admits these severe shortcomings. As a narrative, *The Fate of War* offers a competent retelling of the battle, but nothing revisionist. Schultz recounts biographical detail in lurid fashion; however, readers might struggle with the author's free-form literary style. His

narrative flows from subject to subject without transition. This style will no doubt appeal to readers who enjoy an energetic, highly-dramatized version of the battle, but those who crave analysis will find no joy.

On a more basic level, the author provides no explanation as to why he chose to focus on these particular individuals and not upon others. Schultz admits that he did not mean to render a comprehensive narrative of the battle of Fredericksburg, but he certainly owed readers an explanation as to why he chose these specific characters. Did they reflect particular human conditions wrought by the face of battle? If so, which ones? Why did these personalities and not others better reflect those emotional responses? Readers might have expected Schultz to meet the promise he established in his preface, that is, they might have seen an assessment of "what people can force themselves to do . . . In the face of the ultimate fear of letting down their friends or betraying their own sense of who they are" (vi). No such analysis of the physical, cognitive, emotional, or spiritual combat stressors appears. Instead, the author provides vignettes, many of which have already appeared in countless histories of the battle. In short, the author owed his readers a stronger theme than the one he provided.

The author's uncanny ability to psychoanalyze his biographical subjects serves as *The Fate of War's* bright spot. Schultz's professional training as a psychologist shines splendidly in his prose, and although it was not his primary intent to psychoanalyze such generals as Amrbose Burnside and Robert E. Lee, he does well, actually, nailing down their temperaments in a cogent, persuasive way. For instance, in regard to Burnside and Lee, the battle of Fredericksburg emerged as an inner struggle for both men, a dual attempt by both commanding generals to win a moral victory against their own insecurities. For example, when Burnside learned that the northern press began to blame the Lincoln administration for pressuring him to attack on December 13, the ever-sensitive army commander felt so guilty that he chose to fall on his sword, penning a public missive in which he took blame for the defeat. It is a shame that Schultz did not provide more of this kind of psychoanalysis. His penchant for uncovering the inner world of the human soul besieged by the pressures of battle offered tantalizing hints at an original, provocative thesis.

In any event, readers will be left to wonder why Civil War history needs another book on the battle of Fredericksburg. Generally, *The Fate of War* does not contribute in any significant way to the greater body of literature, and a fuller account of the battle and its personalities can be found in other sources.

However, *The Fate of War* offers an excellent introductory view of the battle, one geared toward enthusiasts who might prefer the “human-interest” side over complex tactical analyses. This book will make a suitable companion for visitors to Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, as its imagery presents a clear picture of the battle as viewed by the profiled personalities. Any reader with imagination can find Schultz’s prose eminently useful. Of course, Schultz himself is a resident of Fredericksburg and he well-understands battlefield visitors’ need to establish a close, personal connection with the hallowed ground. Schultz concludes, “If you stand on the sunken road early of a foggy winter morning and look across the open ground, it is easy to imagine the ghosts of the soldiers who fought there in 1862, to imagine them still trying to reach the stone wall that called so many to their death” (271). Let us hope that, in the midst of the Civil War sesquicentennial, a legion of first-time visitors to Fredericksburg might read *The Fate of War* and have the same emotional experience.

Dr. Timothy J. Orr is Assistant Professor of Military History at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia. He is editor of Last to the Leave the Field: The Life and Letters of First Sergeant Ambrose Henry Hayward, 28th Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry. His current research examines Union mobilization.