

Joshua L. Chamberlain: A Life in Letters

Judkin Browning

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Review

Browning, Judkin

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Desjardin, Thomas *Joshua L. Chamberlain: A Life in Letters*. Osprey Publishing, \$25.95 ISBN 978-1-84908-559-5

New Insight into a Well Known Figure

Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain is well known to historians and Civil War enthusiasts as the man who ably led the 20th Maine Regiment at Little Round Top on July 2, 1863 at Gettysburg. Several years ago, a collection of letters pertaining to Chamberlain came into the possession of the National Civil War Museum in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania through the auspices of the artist Don Troiani, who had acquired them from Chamberlain's descendants. Though not a comprehensive collection of correspondence, most of these letters had never been seen by historians or cited in any published work about Chamberlain. Historian Thomas Desjardin, who has written excellent works on Chamberlain and the battle of Gettysburg, has performed a useful service to historians of the Civil War by editing these letters.

The approximately 250 letters include love letters from Joshua's courtship with his wife Fannie in the 1850s, Civil War letters, and correspondence relating to his postwar activities governor of Maine, commander of the state militia, and president of Bowdoin. Not every letter is remarkable; in fact, a great many of them contain mundane material that can be tedious to pore through, especially in the antebellum sections. But those with the patience to dig can be rewarded with gems. The early letters reveal that the young Joshua and especially the young Fannie (like many young adults throughout history) felt that their own personal angst was the most important problem in the world. Fannie has several interesting observations about the nature of slavery from her time as a teacher in Milledgeville, Georgia. For instance, bemoaning what she saw as a lack of culture in the South, Fannie concludes, "I think the effect of slavery is *incomparably* worse upon the white than the blacks... Miserably ignorant, vulgar-minded negroes are the 'bosom companion' (almost) of southerners from

the cradle up; what could be expected then?" (p. 89). Meanwhile, the letters also suggest that while Fannie was in Georgia, Joshua had intimate relationships with other women, most notably his cousin Annie Chamberlain. The glimpses of the correspondence between these two potential lovers reveal a side of Chamberlain that his biographers often do not discuss.

The Civil War letters also include some valuable nuggets, such as Chamberlain's explanation to his wife as to why he left his professorship to serve in the Union army. "There are things worth more than life and peace," he wrote. "...we fight for all the *guaranties* of what men should love, for the *protection* and *permanence* and *peace* of what is most dear and sacred to every true heart." Chamberlain concluded on a personal note, "That is what I am fighting for at any rate, and I could not live or die in a better cause" (p.172-173). His letters to Fannie throughout the war are poignant and occasionally sentimental, but are also clear, articulate, and insightful analysis of national and military policy.

The postwar letters are less rewarding, because of the sparse and sporadic nature of the letters that exist in the collection. By far the most letters occur in the first five weeks of 1880, when Chamberlain, as commander of the state militia, had to act as military governor during a political crisis in Maine over the contested gubernatorial election of 1879 known as the "Great Count-Out Crisis of 1880." Most of the letters to Chamberlain compliment him on his deft handling of the affair, but offer little else of substance.

Desjardin uses a light touch in his editing of the letters. He offers brief background description before some letters or collections of letters, and does not annotate the letters very heavily. While there is nothing wrong with his presentation of the letters, a solid introductory essay placing the letters and Chamberlain's life in greater context would have been very beneficial, especially to those who are not already deeply familiar with Chamberlain's life and legacy. It also would have helped the reader understand the larger significance of these letters and where the choicest bits were to be found. While this book is not meant to be a page-turner, it nonetheless is a valuable volume, primarily for those who wish to know more about Joshua Chamberlain than just his iconic performance at Gettysburg.

Judkin Browning is an Associate Professor of History at Appalachian State University.

