

For Love & Liberty: The Untold Civil War Story of Major Sullivan Ballou & His Famous Love Letter

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Review

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Young, Robin *For Love & Liberty: The Untold Civil War Story of Major Sullivan Ballou & His Famous Love Letter*. Thunder's Mouth Press, \$35.00
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A Short Life

A Long Book

Sullivan Ballou, the subject of **For Love & Liberty**, was an up-and-coming lawyer and politician in Rhode Island when the Civil War broke out. After some hesitation, he volunteered for service in the 2nd Rhode Island Infantry, where he was commissioned a major. His military career was a short one, however, as he was killed at the age of 32 during the First Battle of Bull Run.

Now, none of this explains why Ballou was chosen as the subject of a biography. After all, the ranks on both sides were filled with men with similar stories. Instead, Ballou's fame rests entirely on a letter he wrote to his wife, Sarah, shortly before his death. It was intended only to be read if he did not survive the battle. It is the sort of letter that earns appellations like poignant, touching, and moving. Ballou's message from beyond the grave has been printed and reprinted in a great many volumes. It was also quoted extensively by Ken Burns in his documentary, *The Civil War*, which provided the inspiration for the book.

The first question that will occur to any reader who picks up a copy of **For Love & Liberty** is how a man who lived such a short time and did not manage to survive the first battle of the war could be the basis for a work nearly a thousand pages in length. In part, it is because the book is filled with every possible detail that the author was able to glean about his life. If one wants to know the names of Ballou's roommates in high school, or what percentage of his regiment were jewelers, that information is included. The density of the book is also due to the author's tendency to give many pages of background information

for every event that is discussed, even if the event was only tangentially important to the life of Sullivan Ballou. The caning of Charles Sumner and Lincoln's Cooper Union address, to take two examples, each get multiple pages.

The primary reason that **For Love & Liberty** is so long, however, is that the book promises—and occasionally delivers—the most complete recounting of the opening hours of the Battle of First Manassas/Bull Run ever compiled. The narrative of the events leading up to the battle and the battle itself begins roughly at page 271 and continues through most of the rest of the volume.

This is most certainly not a book for academic historians. It does not engage any particular body of scholarship, nor does it endeavor to suggest any larger trends or developments that Ballou's life serves to illustrate. His marriage was, by all accounts, an equal partnership, and he and his wife had what was apparently a vigorous sex life. This might have provided an opportunity to discuss evolving conceptions of masculinity and gender in the antebellum era. Or, to take another example, the Ballou family had both skilled artisans and mill owners among its members, and the tensions within the family reflect some of the larger challenges that emerged as America industrialized. But this issue, like other issues of interest to academics, is not addressed in any substantial way.

Instead, this is a book aimed squarely at the genealogists and Civil War buffs of the world. Robin Young is herself an expert on genealogy, having lectured on the subject for more than a decade. This is evident in her obsession with things like naming conventions, and in the detailed information she provides not only on Ballou but on every one of his descendants and relatives she was able to track down. The tone of the book is casual, and it makes frequent use of modern events such as the September 11 attacks to help readers make sense of the past. Modern slang is also employed quite frequently. Bullets are described as ammo, prominent generals are characterized as superstars, and so forth.

As a straightforward biography, the book is fairly successful. The narrative is generally engaging and clear, and Ballou's story is quite interesting. Occasionally, the prose does get a bit overly-dramatic—the cannonball that took Ballou's life, for example, is described as a six-pound ball of death. When dealing with Victorian-era Americans, however, perhaps a little flowery language is to be forgiven.

Young is also to be commended for the depth of her research. The book comes 15 years after the documentary that inspired it, and it seems plausible that the whole time was spent digging up the information that found its way into the book. The book makes heavy use of myriad primary sources, particularly in trying to construct a cohesive narrative of the First Bull Run.

That said, there are some things about **For Love & Liberty** that are cause for complaint. Even given all the things Young was trying to accomplish, the book is bloated, and it should have been pruned quite a bit. For example, Ballou's famous letter is printed in its entirety twice. His death is stretched out over five chapters. The extensive background on famous historical events also seems unnecessary. After all, anyone who purchases such a book surely knows who Charles Sumner was, or what happened at Harpers Ferry in 1859.

The absence of battlefield maps is also a problem. While there are maps of Rhode Island and the United States early in the book, there are none of the battle. No matter how effective Young's narration is, some readers will struggle to follow along without benefit of visuals.

The volume also contains a surprising quantity of misleading or inaccurate information. Though he died in 1861, Ballou is repeatedly identified as a Radical Republican, despite the general consensus among historians that the group did not exist as an identifiable faction until 1862. Abraham Lincoln's proposal to relocate all slaves to Africa is characterized as tongue-in-cheek when it was nothing of the sort. Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain is described as commander of the 21st Maine, when in fact he commanded the 20th Maine. Thermopyl is mischaracterized as the battle in which the Athenians destroyed Sparta, when in fact the two city-states fought as allies to defeat the Persian army.

For Love & Liberty is really two books—one about a Civil War soldier, the other about a battle. Most who read it will enjoy it, though I suspect many will choose to read only the half of the book that captures their interest.

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