

Fierce Patriot: The Tangled Lives of William Tecumseh Sherman

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Review

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O'Connell, Robert *Fierce Patriot: The Tangled Lives of William Tecumseh Sherman*. Random House, \$28.00 ISBN 9781400069729

A Personal Look at Sherman's Grand Vision

The historical reputation of William Tecumseh Sherman has carried some heavy baggage since his death. For generations of Southerners, he embodied the vengeful hand of war. Many saw him as the harbinger of the bloody twentieth century; indeed, the tank that bore his name became symbolic of the century's harsh warfare. Historians, biographers, and novelists have continually interpreted, condemned, romanticized, and reimaged him in numerous personas—visionary, hero, or sadist. Despite a voluminous documentary record, he remains a disputed figure. Robert O'Connell's *Fierce Patriot: The Tangled Lives of William Tecumseh Sherman* is the latest attempt to explain such a complicated life. Most importantly, O'Connell, a military historian interested in large questions about the transformative moments of war, attempts to place Sherman in the broader context of the nineteenth century.

O'Connell has made three critical decisions in his effort to place his subject in this broader context. First, he accepts the argument of John Marszalek, Sherman's most important biographer, that Sherman's incessant need for order dominated his life. Indeed, *Fierce Patriot* articulates the order thesis, demonstrating its central place in Sherman's actions and thoughts. Second, and more problematic, O'Connell's relies solely on published sources. Recognizing how Sherman's voluminous, verbose, and often histrionic letters have led some biographers to present wildly distorted assessments, O'Connell promises to judge his subject by his actions instead of his words. Finally, O'Connell abandons a straight biographical treatment for three distinct examinations of Sherman's life—Sherman as the "general contractor" of continental expansion, his relationship with his army, and his personal life and celebrity as "Uncle Billy." The result is a fascinating portrait of Sherman, a masterful grand

strategist who transformed the U.S. Army while failing to manage a complicated public and private life.

In the first section, O'Connell examines Sherman as grand strategist and argues that his "central historical importance is derived from his role in the physical consolidation of transcontinental America," (p.187). Sherman's gift for strategy grew through his experiences after he graduated from West Point. His military experience in the Seminole War and civilian efforts in California led to a fusion of his strategic gifts and his belief in continental expansion. By 1859, Sherman's strategic vision had led him to produce a plan for a transcontinental railroad, which garnered considerable attention in Washington. His intense nationalist feelings, however, helped blind him to political realities. When Sherman assumed leadership of the Louisiana State Seminary of Learning and Military Academy in 1859, he was ignorant of the depth of Southern discontent. Secession surprised, then outraged him. It was a direct threat to continental expansion and his idea of order. His beliefs allowed him to grasp the true significance of the Civil War before most of colleagues. After a difficult start of the war, he eventually found a comrade in Ulysses S. Grant. The partnership gave Sherman room to thrive—and as he found himself in charge of the Western armies, he transformed the war. "The Confederacy was an idea, and Sherman trampled it relentlessly—its symbols, its institutions, its pride—bled the life out of it and replaced it with hopelessness," (p.186). His grand vision required that the Confederacy must be utterly destroyed.

Victory gave Sherman the power to implement his continental vision. He put together the "highly militarized operation" (p.192) that completed the nation's transcontinental railroad. Although O'Connell sees it as a crowning achievement of Sherman's long-held strategy, he weighs the heavy costs of its completion. "If you were a transcontinentalist, it was brilliant, if you were an Indian or a buffalo, it was a disaster," O'Connell writes, (p.192). Sherman proved shamefully hostile to the Indians that stood in the way of expansion and scornfully of those who defended. Along with Gen. Philip Sheridan, Sherman commanded the subjugation of the Indians and the ecological system upon which they thrived.

The second section explains Sherman's role in shaping the army that defeated the Confederacy and complete expansion. As the war began, Sherman maintained the deep distrust and dislike of the volunteer forces that he had held since West Point. In some of the clearest and best explanation of military action, O'Connell demonstrates how battle created trust between troops and the

commander that they soon called "Uncle Billy." Sherman was able to utilize his power and influence as "absolute master" (p.267) of the Army of the West to create a camaraderie and cohesiveness. The introduction of new accurate weaponry made battle even more frightening and Sherman's effort to keep his men from unnecessary danger strengthened the bond between them. By the time of Atlanta and the March to the Sea, Sherman and his army had shown an unprecedented adaptability that became the standard for armies in the twentieth century.

In his final section, O'Connell attempts to explain Sherman's complicated personal life and how his postwar celebrity affected his family. Charles Sherman died in 1829 leaving his wife with eleven children. Unable to carry such a burden, Mary Sherman sent several of her children to other families to raise. The nine-year-old Sherman found himself in the home of Thomas Ewing, his father's best friend. The Ewing family provided him with love, stability, wealth, and access. He grew close to his adopted family and eventually began courting his strong-willed adoptive sister, Ellen. The two eventually married and Sherman found himself dominated by his family. The attempt to control his life and fate proved stifling. His father had arranged his appointment to West Point, but once they were married Ellen and her father pressured him to quit the military for civilian life. Ellen hoped that Sherman would enter the family's salt mining business but Sherman stubbornly refused, eventually moving his family to California where he worked in banking. Ellen Sherman never wanted to leave her father and often returned to her family Ohio, usually after becoming pregnant. The anxiety over where he would raise his family was exacerbated by Ellen's incessant push for him to convert to Catholicism. This emotional tug of war between such strong personalities led to the couple spending considerable time apart. "These two were like gunpowder and gasoline, packed with unspent energy, best stored separately," (p.312). The Ewing's attempt to determine his future ended only after he began to prove himself on the battlefield. Indeed, Ellen and the Ewing family became his strongest supporters, carefully watching after his public reputation.

His success on the battlefield made him a celebrity—"Uncle Billy"—the commander who broke the Confederacy's back. Some of O'Connell's richest observations surround postwar America's construction of this new type of fame. His fame succeeded at putting even more distance between himself and Ellen. Only after the war did Sherman appreciate how strong Ellen's influence had been on his children. Sherman was aghast at the depths of their indoctrination in

the Catholic Church. Indeed, the decision of his son, Tom, to join the priesthood infuriated Sherman and damaged an already precarious family dynamic. Sherman's reacted with an outrage and deepened his bitterness toward Ellen. Indeed, he often proved cruel to Ellen, especially at her weight gain and fading beauty. He often found living among the public as "Uncle Billy" more satisfying than his family. While O'Connell writes about the contours of Sherman's personal complications with passion, it also leads him astray from his approach. In particular, Sherman's passionate and intimate correspondence with several young women leads O'Connell to assume they were sexual relationships. While Ellen certainly believed the relationship inappropriate, the reader must wonder if this is the verbose correspondent that O'Connell treats skeptically in the matters of war. His further speculation that Sherman lost his virginity to a prostitute lends the work a sensational tone.

Fierce Patriot lays bare most of Sherman's complexities and problems but stumbles on the matter of slavery, emancipation and race. Historians have often apologized for or condemned Sherman for his indifferent racial views. O'Connell tries to split the difference. While admitting Sherman's indifference slavery and disparagement of the slaves, O'Connell believes the role of Sherman's army in emancipation absolves him. And he insists that in his personal interactions with freedman he "treated these people respectfully and without condescension," (p.xxvi). He fails to fully grapple with how Sherman's racial views fit with his grand strategy. Along with his treatment of the Indians and the newly freedmen, it becomes clear that Sherman vision of a continental America was distinctly white. In spite of this shortcoming, O'Connell has produced one of the most accessible of recent studies of Sherman. However, the author's effort to connect to modern audiences leads to unfortunate stylistic choices. His consistent references to "Team Ewing" and "Team Sherman" are grating and will certainly date the book. While *Fierce Patriot* will not supplant Marszalek's work as the seminal biography of Sherman, it should serve as a good introduction for modern audiences.

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