

A Fierce Glory: Antietam—The Desperate Battle that Saved Lincoln and Doomed Slavery

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Review

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Martin, Justin. *A Fierce Glory: Antietam—The Desperate Battle that Saved Lincoln and Doomed Slavery.* Da Capo Press, \$28.00 ISBN 9780306825255

The Bloodiest Day in American History Gets a Retelling

The bloodiest single day in American military history, the Battle of Antietam was also a pivotal moment in the Civil War that is nonetheless often overshadowed by more infamous battles such as Shiloh, Vicksburg, and Gettysburg. Still, a number of good full-length accounts do exist. Among them are James Murphin's *The Gleam of Bayonets* (1965), John Michael Priest's *Antietam: The Soldier's Battle* (1989), Stephen Sears' *Landscape Turned Red* (1993), and James McPherson's *Crossroads of Freedom* (2002). Besides the staggering numbers of casualties, perhaps what most attracts scholars and Civil War enthusiasts to this particular battle is the fame (or infamy) of its participants—Robert E. Lee, George B. McClellan, Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson, Ambrose Burnside—as well as the battle's role as a catalyst for Lincoln's issuing the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. In fact, it is this later facet of the Civil War that Justin Martin seeks to highlight in his newest book, *A Fierce Glory: Antietam—The Desperate Battle that Saved Lincoln and Doomed Slavery*.

Martin's account is a minute-by-minute retelling of the Battle of Antietam that includes much of the standard narrative found in other books. What makes this work unique from others, however, is Martin's decision to “flash” between the familiar events of the battle—the fight for “Burnside's Bridge”, the slaughterhouses that were the “Cornfield” and “Bloody Lane”—as well as the less well-known doings that day of President Lincoln in Washington, D.C. As Martin observes early in his account, “Existing Antietam titles tend to go light on Lincoln.” (xiv) Martin also makes an important assertion about this battle's place among the more famous battles of the Civil War. “The case for Antietam is simple and irrefutable,” he writes. “Had its outcome been different, there would have been no Gettysburg.” (xvi)

One of the true strengths of Martin's work is the fact that he truly did his homework. Aside from using the common sources on the battle—the Original Records, McClellan's published papers, Lee's dispatches, memoirs of surviving generals like Longstreet and Chamberlain—he also consulted many soldiers' accounts never before published. He also made numerous visits to the battlefield, now a national park, which allowed him to give his account the “you are there” feel that is absolutely essential to a popular history of this kind.

Another interesting component of this work is Martin's unique writing style. His words invoke emotion in his readers—a quality that can be challenging to the historical writer. On page 15, for instance, he equates the Union war strategy at the start of the battle to a one-two-three boxing maneuver delivered to the face of the Confederate Army. On page 25, when discussing the death of Lincoln's law clerk Elmer Ellsworth, he summarized the event by saying, “Intimate: the word doesn't seem like it could possibly be fitting for something as brutal as warfare, yet somehow it's apt.” And again on page 48, he describes one Louisiana confederate regiment by stating, “jumbled together, they formed a kind of combat jambalaya.”

At times, however, this conversational tone can be a weakness. Indeed, it often leads Martin to make conclusions about a person's thoughts that he could not possibly know for certain. In several instances, he puts words into the minds and mouths of people without any physical evidence that they said or thought them. On page 130, for instance, while depicting a near-miss from a Union shell that killed D. H. Hill's horse, Martin describes Robert E. Lee's reaction, writing, “he had been carefully tending his rage, stoking it like a furnace.” Martin asserts that Lee's supposed rage was brought to the surface by this near-miss, but actually originated with the Union seizure of Arlington House in 1861. However, he cites no source for this fact. Lee's emotions, as well as his thoughts in this moment, are mere conjecture on the part of the author.

While Martin claims that his book is unique in the premium it places on President Abraham Lincoln's thoughts and actions during the battle, the author of this review found that particular part of the book less groundbreaking than expected. Indeed, much of the information on Lincoln's whereabouts is readily available in a dozen biographies on the sixteenth president. Instead, Martin would have been better suited to have emphasized the novelty in this account of depictions of army camp life, as well as the plight of journalists, artists, and photographers who sought to cover every part of the battle. Another interesting touch is his depictions of the actions

of the Sharpsburg residents while the battle ensued. One wishes he had spent more time on this underappreciated aspect of military combat.

Perhaps the most beneficial way to read Martin's account is as a primer for a visit to the Antietam National Battlefield Park. Indeed, Martin says in his afterward that he gained much insight for writing the book from his many visits to the site. He also provides an excellent list of related sites and books of interest, making his work a unique blend of academic and public history. Undoubtedly, while the experienced historian might find little new information in this text, it will nonetheless prove valuable to the novice military historian and Civil War enthusiast. For that reason alone, the author is to be commended. He has managed to write a very understandable and entertaining account of a pivotal and chaotic moment in American History.

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