

First Fallen: The Life of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, the North's First Civil War Hero

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Review

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Groeling, Meg. *First Fallen: The Life of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, the North's First Civil War Hero*. Savas Beatie, 2021. HARDCOVER. \$29.95 ISBN 9781611215373 pp. 336

Elmer Ellsworth makes a cameo appearance at the beginning of most general histories of the Civil War. He was the first officer to be killed defending the United States in 1861. He was close to Abraham Lincoln, who personally mourned his death and wrote to Ellsworth's parents. What else is there to the Ellsworth story? Was he really that important? The last biography of Ellsworth was written by Ruth Painter Randall six decades ago, but was a new one needed? Upon seeing this title, a reader's first response could well be to wonder whether it represents the work of a doctoral candidate seizing upon a deservedly obscure figure in a desperate bid to find an original thesis topic, or perhaps an untrained but enthusiastic amateur's venture into antiquarian trivia.

Fortunately, it is neither. The author confesses to being a "Civil War buff" who was moved to write about Ellsworth after being overcome with emotion at the National Portrait Gallery's exhibit on his death, but she also has had sufficient graduate training to give the book a professional tone (but not so much as to rob her writing of verve and style). More important, the question that emerges from reading her work is not whether we need a book about Ellsworth, but why the figure once described by John Hay as "the most talked-of man in the country" should have been so thoroughly forgotten after the Civil War (viii). Groeling shows how well-known Ellsworth was during his brief life, even before his heroic death in 1861, and how intensely he was remembered after it, at least for a time.

Elmer Ellsworth, as portrayed here, was as much the archetypal American self-made man as Abraham Lincoln. Like Lincoln, Ellsworth disdained his father's acceptance of modest working-class success, although he outdid Lincoln in exaggerating the poverty of his upbringing. When he was seventeen, he went west, leaving his parents behind in Mechanicsville, New York and moving to Chicago, the city on the make, in 1854. By 1857, in a business partnership with

Arthur Devereux (later an officer in the 19th Massachusetts) he had made some money, but then lost it in a bad investment and had to start the self-making process over again.

Ellsworth 2.0, the one who became famous, started his upward climb with a lucky encounter with a Crimean War veteran who had served in one of France's Zouave units. Ellsworth had long been fascinated with military drill and uniforms and had indulged this by joining a militia company when his finances allowed. The militia movement of the 1850s, as Groeling describes, was more social than political or military. It gave young men like Ellsworth the opportunity to forge friendships, belong to a team, host dances and banquets, and show off for the public by performing close-order drills, like a modern marching band. Unlike the maneuvers of a marching band, however, these drills were not just for show, but were the same movements a military company would use in battle. Ellsworth had studied the U.S. Army's drill books, written by Winfield Scott and William Hardee, and found them wanting in dash and excitement. When he learned of the faster, more gymnastic Zouave drill, he found his path to fame. He became known throughout Illinois as an elite drillmaster. In 1859 he took over a moribund militia company, taught it the Zouave drill, and as leader of the "United States Zouave Cadets," became the toast of Chicago for the performance of his drill team at events celebrating Independence Day in 1859.

Although militia organizations were not expressly political, in the way that twenty-first century "militias" espouse extremist politics, they were part of the intensely political climate of the 1850s. After Ellsworth met Abraham Lincoln early in 1860, he quickly fell in with Lincoln's young acolytes John Hay and John Nicolay, and found a professional home as a law clerk in Lincoln's office. At the Republican convention in May 1860, Ellsworth was called on to mobilize Chicago's numerous militia units, brass bands, and "Wide Awake" marching clubs to demonstrate on behalf of Illinois's favorite son. Through the summer of 1860, Ellsworth's U.S. Zouave Cadets toured the country in triumph, implicitly promoting Lincoln's candidacy with their displays of western vigor. By October, Lincoln employed Ellsworth as an openly political operative, convincing him to give speeches on Lincoln's behalf throughout Illinois. Groeling's discussion of the politicization of the militia movement and of Ellsworth himself is among the most revelatory parts of the book.

Ellsworth accompanied Lincoln on most of the rail journey from Springfield to Washington, D.C. in 1861. When war broke out, Ellsworth immediately went to New York City

to recruit a regiment of Zouaves from the members of volunteer firefighting organizations, units that like militia companies were part of the pre-war “bachelor subculture” of Northern cities. It was as colonel of the 11th New York (Fire Zouaves) that he led an expedition across the Potomac into Alexandria, Virginia, on May 24, 1861.

Having established that Ellsworth was a national celebrity as well as a historically meaningful representative figure, Groeling’s account of his death takes on greater weight. She notes that the Confederate flag over the Marshall Hotel in Alexandria is mentioned in every telling of the Ellsworth tale, but questions whether it was actually visible from the White House. Since Alexandria was under a flag of truce at the time, Ellsworth was not killed in combat but murdered by the hotel keeper who objected to his removal of the Confederate flag. Nonetheless, the nation immediately perceived that he had died for the Union, leading to an outpouring of public mourning. Groeling effectively puts Lincoln’s tears for his young friend and Ellsworth’s White House funeral into the context of contemporary mourning customs and the idea of the “good death.” The letters that Lincoln and John Hay wrote about Ellsworth, she argues, would come to serve in memory as stand-ins for the thousands of families who did not get letters from the White House upon the deaths of their sons over the next four years. Likewise, no one else who died for the Union would get an elaborate multi-state series of funerals like Ellsworth did, until Lincoln himself in April 1865.

This is a fine book. It takes a minor but well-known story, amplifies it with new evidence, and enhances its meaning by connecting it to larger social and political trends. The biographical text is supplemented by several intriguing appendices, including one on the rival Confederate memory of May 24, 1861, that focuses on Ellsworth’s killer as hero and martyr. Every era of history has its professors and university press books; students of the American Civil War are fortunate also to have talented authors outside of academia like Meg Groeling, and publishers like Savas Beatie giving them a voice.

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