

The Generals' Civil War, What Their Memoirs Can Teach Us Today

Wesley Moody

Florida State College at Jacksonville, wesley.moody@fscj.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Moody, Wesley (2022) "The Generals' Civil War, What Their Memoirs Can Teach Us Today," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 24 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.24.2.07

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol24/iss2/7>

Review

Moody, Wesley

Spring 2022

Cushman, Stephen. *The Generals' Civil War, What Their Memoirs Can Teach Us Today.* University of North Carolina Press, 2021. PAPERBACK. ISBN 9781469666020 pp. 230

As a professional historian, it can be frustrating when non-historians invade my field. As a Civil War historian, I may feel this more acutely than others. This is true even when it is other academics playing in my sandbox. With great reserve, I began reading Stephen Cushman's *The Generals' Civil War, What Their Memoirs Can Teach Us Today*. Cushman is a professor of English at the University of Virginia. Cushman, however, was not crossing a line. He examines the published memoirs as literature. Although I am not qualified to judge his contribution to his field, I can see he has made a considerable contribution to the field of Civil War history.

Cushman begins his work with a justification for his choice of only examining the memoirs of the leaders and ignoring the countless memoirs and journals produced by enlisted men and junior officers. In our current mania for giving voice to the voiceless, this is a criticism of which Cushman must have grown tired. His response is that the generals' memoirs offer all the blood, dirt, and front-line realism of any private's journal but also the big picture.

Cushman examines the memoirs of six generals, three Confederates, and three Union. The ones he chose have all been examined by Civil War historians, but they treat the memoirs as belated after-action reports. Cushman treats them as pieces of literature. He discusses the post-war book market, the styles of the authors, as well as their overall arguments. He also looks at the literary and classical references they use, something most Civil War historians miss.

Cushman reserved the most ink for General Ulysses Grant's memoirs. His was the most popular Civil War memoir of the late-nineteenth century and remains so today. Cushman explores the reason for this. Grant's writing is a simple, straightforward telling of what happened. This is not a unique observation of Cushman's. He argues further that the reason for Grant's success goes beyond that. There was humility in Grant's writing that is lacking in most similar works. Cushman also argues that Grant was a student of Lincoln. Grant's memoirs'

simplicity, humility, and humor have their origins in Grant's reading of the Lincoln-Douglas debates while he was still a struggling Missouri farmer.

Dedicating a chapter to George McClellan in a short book about generals' memoirs while excluding others is not a choice I would have made. I am incredibly grateful that Cushman did. One of the reasons for the success of Grant and William T. Sherman among modern readers is that there is a universality to it. Today, a reader can enjoy it and be enlightened by it as much as the nineteenth-century reader. McClellan, on the other, had always seemed highly dated in comparison. Cushman explains this in a way that makes me feel that it is my shortcoming, not McClellan's. He also presents some interesting questions that will make the reader rethink "Little Mac."

Cushman also shows us the importance of Mark Twain's influence not only on American Literature but as a businessman and his influence on how we remember our Civil War. His company not only brought us Grant's book but most of the influential ones.

For the professional Civil War historian, the graduate student, or the casual learner, I highly recommend reading Stephen Cushman's *The General's Civil War* before tackling any of the great memoirs. I wish it had been around when I used those books for my graduate research.

Wesley Moody is a professor of history at Florida State College at Jacksonville. He is the author of four books, including, Demon of the Lost Cause, Sherman and Civil War History, and Seven Myths of the Civil War. wesley.moody@fscj.edu