

Union Warriors at Sunset: The Lives of Twenty Commanders After the War

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Review

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Povall, Allie Stuart. *Union Warriors at Sunset: The Lives of Twenty Commanders After the War*. McFarland, 2022. SOFTCOVER. \$39.95 ISBN 9781476690506 pp. 203

As Otto Eisenschiml observed in a 1960 article titled “Too Many Civil War Books?” biographies are perennial favorites because they allow readers to experience vicariously the joys and tribulations of renowned figures’ lives. With Civil War generals, however, most biographical treatments have focused on wartime experiences, while summing up postbellum lives in a chapter or two. Allie Stuart Povall apportions his biographical coverages quite differently, giving equal or greater consideration to what happened to famous commanders in blue *after* the guns fell silent.

Povall’s work can be read as a companion piece to his earlier *Rebels in Repose: Confederate Commanders After the War* (2019). There, Povall shows that, for those Confederate generals and admirals who survived, the end of conventional hostilities in 1865 amounted to a comma in their personal sagas—not a period. Ex-Confederate military leaders by necessity had to reconstruct themselves as private citizens. As for the United States commanders studied here, especially those who stayed on active duty, most faced their own peculiar challenges, such as getting by on smaller paychecks, dealing with obtrusive bureaucracies, and worrying about retirements, reputations, and legacies.

The men Povall has chosen will surprise few: twelve army commanders (George Meade, George McClellan, Philip Sheridan, William T. Sherman, Ulysses S. Grant, Ambrose Burnside, George H. Thomas, Henry W. Halleck, Irvin McDowell, John Pope, Joseph Hooker, and William S. Rosecrans), two fleet commanders (David Farragut, David Dixon Porter), five division and corps commanders (George Custer, George Crook, Winfield Scott Hancock, Lew Wallace, Daniel Sickles), and one brigade commander (Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain). Apart from Crook, they are all well-known in Civil War circles. Nor will readers consider it unusual that Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan are each treated separately (whereas Burnside, Hancock, and a

dozen others are lumped together in one chapter), or that general-turned-president Grant has the longest chapter. Roughly 30 to 40 percent of each biographical sketch deals with the antebellum period and wartime, with the remainder given to postwar lives, followed by Povall's brief assessment of the subject's historical standing.

Notwithstanding the wide range of personalities, some common threads emerge. Because United States commanders usually reverted to their lower Regular Army ranks after Appomattox, they were frequently moved to new stations and served time in the western states and territories. And nearly all of them pulled occupation duty in the devastated southern states, where, excepting the volatile Sheridan, they made at best minimal efforts to suppress anti-Reconstruction terrorist forces. Federal policy towards the native nations divided the men, with some supportive of relocation (and extermination) initiatives and a surprisingly larger cadre favoring accommodation and diplomacy. Moreover, a postwar "battle of the books," during which the aging warriors struggled for historical respect, turned many comrades (such as Crook and Sheridan) against each other. Those who left the service, including Chamberlain and McClellan, were on the whole successful in politics and business. Grant, of course, was in a category of his own, and Povall deftly covers the twists and turns of his time in the Oval Office, assigning an average rating to Grant's presidency.

With his postbellum focus, Povall digs up some tidbits often lost amidst the blaring "drum and trumpets" tone typical of Civil War biography. First, higher-ranking generals were occasionally gifted new or restored residences in posh neighborhoods of Washington, D.C., and New York City by adoring fans. In fact, Grant and Sherman swapped one home after they moved up to president and general-of-the-army respectively, even though Sherman later complained that maintaining it left him "house poor," in modern parlance. Second, lavish entertaining in peacetime, without the rigors and shortages of the field, caused Sheridan, Hancock, and several others to gain a lot of weight, although in the context of the hefty Gilded Age there was less fat-shaming than today. Finally, and as recent veterans studies have argued, safe returns home did not necessarily deepen familial affections; according to Povall, both Sherman and Grant suffered marital strains in later years (as did Chamberlain, although his troubles are not covered here).

Povall's bibliography is entirely secondary, drawn from standard-length studies of his subjects supplemented by a few general works. Given his overall approach, the absence of manuscript sources is no great loss, for mass biographical overviews rarely promise new

scholarly insights. One can take Povall to task, however, for some minor factual errors (much as one sympathizes with the plight of present-day writers bereft of assistance from [nonexistent] copy editors at downsizing presses). For example, he writes on pages 88-89 that Rosecrans' Army of Tennessee was for a time under siege at Nashville, Tennessee in the autumn of 1863; it should be "Army of the Cumberland" and "Chattanooga." More egregious offenses pertain to regurgitating "facts" which were disproven long ago. Contra Povall, Hooker did *not* give his name to the eponymous street walkers, Grant did *not* lose 7,000 men in one assault at Cold Harbor, and Chickamauga does *not* mean "River of Death."

Aside from these glitches, Povall offers an entertaining summary of almost two dozen individual lives—no mean feat for the best biographer. While one might quibble with his unkind labelling of Sheridan as "Fat Phil" or Rosecrans as "the chicken of Chickamauga," Povall, himself a veteran, renders fewer harsh judgments than the average Civil War historian. Even for McClellan, he has a few kind things to say. Povall's work adds more color to the United States commanders than Ezra Warner did in *Generals in Blue* (1964). An easy, casual read, it serves well for those seeking to know more about the postbellum lives of Civil War generals, without having to flip to the back parts of an assortment of two-, three-, or four-hundred-page biographical tomes.

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