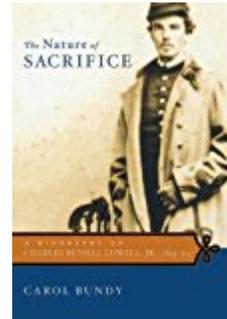


Carol Bundy. *The Nature of Sacrifice: A Biography of Charles Russell Lowell, Jr., 1835-1864*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005. viii + 548 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-374-12077-1.



Reviewed by Robert A. Taylor (Humanities Department, Florida Institute of Technology)

Published on H-CivWar (January, 2006)

A Boston Brahmin in Peace and War

The Civil War was, without doubt, the defining experience for an entire generation of young nineteenth-century Americans. Many men paid the ultimate price for that knowledge and went to early graves, uncertain as to whether North or South would prevail in the struggle. One such individual was Charles Russell Lowell, Jr. The scion of a prominent Boston family, Lowell was killed leading his cavalry brigade at the battle of Cedar Creek in 1864. The twenty-nine-year-old joined other family members and friends who gave up their tomorrows for the cause of union and emancipation. In a detailed biography, Carol Bundy, a Lowell descendant, retells his story in an engaging narrative style that will especially appeal to non-academic readers.

In the author's view, Lowell's life cannot be fully evaluated unless it is put into the context of his family and social circle. Born in 1835, young Charles never had to wonder who he was or where he belonged in a closely knit network of kin. Unfortunately his father suffered the not-uncommon humiliation of financial ruin and a gradual slip into genteel poverty. The immediate family managed to stay afloat due to the strenuous efforts of Charles' mother Anna, who stepped into the family leadership role. By running a private school she was able

to find enough eager students to pay the bills, as well as remain part of the blossoming local intellectual community. Books and spirited debate were a way of life for Charles and his siblings, and he took to them at an early age. Not surprisingly he matriculated at Harvard, where, despite a lack of enthusiasm for what he saw as a stale curriculum, he graduated at the head of the class of 1854. Despite solid connections to the Transcendentalist movement, and friendships with the likes of Emerson and Hawthorne, he eschewed a scholarly career and endeavored to succeed in the business world. The stinging memory of his father's bankruptcy spurred him into striving for a measure of financial security in the field of manufacturing.

Lowell was an interested observer and supporter of the abolitionist movement rising in his New England home. The Fugitive Slave Law, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and the heated debate between Cotton and Conscience Whigs fueled Lowell's and his peers concerns about the state of the nation and perhaps civilization itself. Overwork at his iron foundry position ruined his health, causing him to seek relief in a lengthy European sojourn until 1858. Rambling around the continent, often with friends and relations along, revived him and certainly gave him a

cosmopolitan perspective. Upon returning home he entered the employ of the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad as an executive. Two years on the raw frontier toughened Lowell further and gave him the ability to interact with a wide variety of people, a skill he would soon need in his military vocation

1860 found Lowell managing an iron mill in western Maryland, and he gladly cast his solidly Republican vote for Abraham Lincoln. Interestingly, it was the firing on Massachusetts troops moving through Baltimore in April 1861, and not Fort Sumter, that brought him off the sidelines and into uniform. Brother James and future brother-in-law Robert Gould Shaw joined him and others from his social strata in the Union Army. Lowell used such relationships to secure a commission as a captain in a regular army cavalry regiment. He easily took to martial life, but soon learned that the war would be more costly than he ever imagined when his brother was killed in action at the debacle at Balls Bluff. Lowell himself went on to serve with General George McClellan's staff, where he soon grew disillusioned with Little Mac after the frustrating 1862 Peninsula campaign. The carnage at Antietam gave the Harvard man a lesson in what war truly was, and in the author's opinion shook him to his core. He subsequently jumped at a chance to take command of his own regiment, the Second Massachusetts Cavalry. By the spring of 1863, now-Colonel Lowell trained his troopers and made his reputation after mortally wounding a mutinous recruit.

The Second Massachusetts ironically drilled near the famed Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Infantry under Lowell's friend Robert Shaw. Shaw's sister Effie caught Lowell's eye and they were soon engaged. Lowell himself was an ardent supporter of the Fifty-Fourth and the idea of creating African-American units for the Union forces. Shaw's later death at Fort Wagner staggered him, as the price his peers were paying in the struggle grew heavier. However, operations went on and the Second Massachusetts was deployed as part of the greater defenses of Washington.

Lowell's first command was far from an easy one with disharmony among his officers and men all too common. Their assignment meant that they would not be marching with the Army of the Potomac, and morale suffered as a

consequence. Their primary mission, to stop the troublesome raids of Confederate John S. Mosby's Rangers in the Virginia countryside, proved a difficult and distasteful duty. Lowell adapted and soon his cavalymen made life at least more complicated for Mosby. By spring 1864 he had advanced to the command of a cavalry brigade that tangled with Jubal Early's rebel army as it threatened Washington. Then it went on to fight in the Shenandoah Valley.

At this point the young colonel proved not to be immune from a growing sense of war-weariness and frustration. Author Bundy believes that "it was the experience of the war and its bungled prosecution, and not the reasons for the war or even its success or failure, that was wearing young men down" (p. 247). However, he was not about to quit, and told his new wife that "wars are bad, but there are many things worse" (p. 299). His resolve and courage would be tested in the Shenandoah in 1864, especially the wholesale destruction of farms supplying the Confederates. Lowell now knew how cruel his war had become.

The clash at Cedar Creek was Lowell's finest hour as a combat commander. He led his brigade from the front and helped buy time for General Philip Sheridan to rally the scattered infantry and turn potential defeat into solid victory. Struck by a spent bullet, Lowell refused to leave the field while his men were under fire. A second wound proved to be fatal, and he joined his brother, brother-in-law, and six cousins in death. For them, the nature of sacrifice was to make the ultimate one for their nation and their beliefs.

This biography is well researched and written in a lively style, but unfortunately the text is marred by several factual errors. The author seems to infer that Thomas Jefferson wrote the preamble to the Constitution (p. 124) and that the Confederate constitutional convention was held in Mobile rather than Montgomery, Alabama (p.164). There is also an occasional problem with military terms, such as calling a cavalry company a "Boston regiment" (p. 461). These few flaws aside, *The Nature of Sacrifice* is an interesting and at times poignant work that contributes to the ever-growing literature of the Civil War.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

Citation: Robert A. Taylor. Review of Bundy, Carol, *The Nature of Sacrifice: A Biography of Charles Russell Lowell, Jr., 1835-1864*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. January, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11054>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.