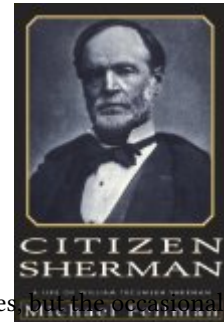


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael Fellman. *Citizen Sherman: A Life of William Tecumseh Sherman*. New York: Random House, 1995. xiv + 486 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-679-42966-1.

Reviewed by Mark Grimsley (The Ohio State University)
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William T. Sherman has been fortunate in his biographers. In the 1920s the renowned British military thinker B.H. Liddell Hart wrote a study that hailed him as a master of the strategic “indirect approach” – the hallmark, in Liddell Hart’s opinion, of military genius. In 1932 Lloyd Lewis published *SHERMAN: FIGHTING PROPHET*, a vivid portrait that became a Civil War classic. Just three years ago, John F. Marszalek gave us *Sherman: A Soldier’s Passion for Order*, which quickly took a deserved place as the standard Sherman biography. Now Michael Fellman offers *Citizen Sherman*, a contentious but unfailingly interesting study of the man who is perhaps the quintessential American soldier.

It may as well be said at the outset that this book does not replace Marszalek’s as the standard work on Sherman. Practically by definition, such a biography would have to deal extensively and effectively with Sherman’s military career, and this is emphatically not Fellman’s central purpose. Indeed, the book betrays a distinct disinterest in strategic and operational matters. Fellman is far more concerned with Sherman the man: his unsettled childhood; his unhappy, slightly weird marriage to Ellen Ewing, his foster sister; his restless, iconoclastic opinions on practically every subject; and above all, the profound rage in Sherman’s heart that found expression in his destructive marches across the South and in his role as “grand strategist” of America’s near-annihilation of Indian autonomy and culture.

A strength of the book is its thematic organization, which is especially pronounced in the post-Civil War segments: one chapter discusses Sherman’s involvement with Indian policy, another the other facets of his fifteen-year tenure as commanding general, still another his marriage and peccadilloes, and so on. This organiza-

tion can be slightly awkward at times, but the mild confusion is more than offset by the interpretive power that such concentrations of focus permit Fellman to muster.

Not everyone will agree with Fellman’s emphases or interpretations, and his conclusions sometimes outrun his evidence. For example, although Sherman assuredly liked to flirt, there is precious little to support Fellman’s contention that the general actually bedded either the sculptress Vinnie Reams or Mary Audenreid, the widow of a trusted aide. I think Sherman probably did, but I’m guessing, just as Fellman is guessing. When hard evidence is unavailable on key aspects of their subjects’ lives, biographers are entitled to intelligent speculations based on the long, subtle acquaintance they develop with their subjects, but it is wrong to give them a misleading air of certainty. Fellman is a bit more appropriate in his guesswork about Tom Sherman, the son who outraged Sherman by becoming a Catholic priest: he suggests that Tom may have been “a homosexual who used the priesthood as a means to evade the implications of that orientation,” but relegates this tidbit to an endnote (p. 464, note 10).

My reservations about Fellman’s treatment of Sherman’s domestic life are quibbles, however. In the main, he reconstructs this aspect of Sherman’s life with skill and considerable insight and in an engaging style that makes the book a pleasure to read. The handling of Sherman’s Civil War years gave me greater pause, and I will devote the balance of this review to explaining why. This is a bit unfair, because only about 40 percent of the book deals with the Civil War, and to repeat, *Citizen Sherman* is by no means a military biography. On the other hand, much of Sherman’s claim to biographical treatment de-

rives from his Civil War exploits; although one could argue that his life provides an unusually sharp lens into the values and mores of Victorian America, that is hardly the reason most people want to read about him, particularly subscribers to H-CivWar.

As with other areas of the book, Fellman's treatment of the Civil War years is thematic. The nine chapters focus, respectively, on Sherman's apparent mental collapse in late 1861, his "ecstatic resurrection" at Shiloh, his notorious wrangles with the press, his shift from a conciliatory to a severe posture toward Southern whites, his attitudes toward slavery and African Americans, his growing zest for destruction, his experience of both military and personal loss during the war, his career as "selective destroyer" in the Savannah and Carolinas campaigns, and his subsequent startling switch to lenient peacemaker at the Bennett Place in 1865. These emphases are well-chosen – the chapter on loss is a particularly nice touch – but I was surprised to see so little done with the Grant-Sherman relationship. Though it was quite important to both men, it is strangely muted and elusive in the book.

Similarly, I would be curious to know what Fellman makes of Sherman's ineptness as a battlefield tactician. Whatever his virtues as an operational commander, Sherman was downright awful in his handling of military engagements. His off-hand remark at Chickasaw Bayou in December 1862 – that it would cost 5,000 men to capture Vicksburg, and the price might as well be paid then as later – was the prelude to an unimaginative frontal assault on the Walnut Hills that ended in prompt, complete failure. At Missionary Ridge in November 1863 his share of the attack suffered humiliating defeat in what was otherwise a storybook Union triumph. The bloody, needless assault at Kennesaw Mountain in June 1864 – vividly depicted in Charles Royster's *The Destructive War* (1991) – also fits the pattern, as does Sherman's squandering of a wonderful opportunity to destroy the Confederate army at Bentonville in March 1865.

Albert Castel made a formidable case against Sherman's generalship in *Decision in the West: The Atlanta Campaign of 1864* (1992), but it has always seemed to me that Sherman's tactical clumsiness cries out for psychological interpretation. It almost seems as if Sherman mistrusted his ability to outfight an opponent on the battlefield, convinced himself that tactical finesse did not matter, and so committed his forces to action with little forethought – or, as at Bentonville, withheld them just as inexplicably. Of these actions, Fellman comments only on Kennesaw Mountain, and, considering his bold conclu-

sions on other subjects, his position here is disappointingly modest: he says only that it is not possible to know exactly why Sherman ordered the attack; he does not seem to realize that even frontal assaults can be carried out with calculating intelligence rather than wild abandon.

Of course, the heart of any Sherman biography is his relationship to the destructive war waged against Southern civilians and property. Fellman rightly accords Sherman a central role in the development and execution of this "hard war" policy, but like previous biographers he does not pay much attention to the fact that there were other practitioners of hard war and other important examples besides those in which Sherman was personally involved.

I minded this less, however, than I did the sense Fellman gives readers that Sherman's destructive marches were mere extensions of his psychological rage – as if Sherman's personality traits suffice to explain the Savannah and Carolinas campaigns, without reference to the specific military situation in which Sherman found himself after the fall of Atlanta, or to the logistical realities of the Civil War more generally.

However potent the fury in Sherman's heart, his climactic marches in the closing months of the war can be better explained by the fact that his opponent, John B. Hood, had chosen to abandon the Georgia theater for an invasion of Tennessee; by the fact that Sherman regarded his supply line from Nashville to Georgia as fragile and untenable; and by the fact that, in order to reach a new supply base on the coast, Sherman's army supposedly had to live off the land. Similarly, Sherman's subsequent march through the Carolinas was made possible by the absence of any major Confederate forces in his path, and necessary by the unavailability of enough sealift capacity to get Sherman's army to the Richmond-Petersburg theater in a timely fashion.

Fellman's impatience with such workaday operational matters reflects a larger inattention to other military factors that decidedly affected Sherman's outlook, decisions, and experiences. His education and professionalization within the antebellum army, for example, surely exerted an influence on Sherman as powerful as his unhappy childhood, but *Citizen Sherman* says precious little about it. It is entirely characteristic of this book that it finds occasion to cite *Darkness Visible* (1990), William Styron's memoir of clinical depression, but not the authoritative recent study of antebellum officership, William B. Skelton's *An American Profession of Arms*

(1992).

Despite such grouplings – and I confess that as a military historian I sometimes found *Citizen Sherman* a bit aggravating – I liked the biography more than I expected to. It is written with style and verve. It is also deeply researched and enormously informed by Fellman's early training as a historian of American culture. Finally, although I have had a long independent acquaintanceship with Sherman, I found that Fellman offered insights and interpretations that, if not always persuasive, were cer-

tainly rewarding to read. This book is an excellent complement to Marszalek's *Sherman* and a worthy successor to Fellman's earlier Civil War Book, *Inside War: The Guerilla Conflict in Missouri During the Civil War* (1989).

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