

George C. Rable. *Fredericksburg! Fredericksburg!*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. xiv + 671 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2673-7.



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The battle of Fredericksburg, fought on December 13, 1862, has always stood as a symbol of military disaster. To this day, most Civil War buffs flinch at the mere mention of the name of the Union commander, Ambrose E. Burnside, who has become something of a symbol of military incompetence, despite recent attempts to rehabilitate his rather pathetic reputation. It may have been the easiest victory ever achieved by Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, and was a far more disastrous setback than that experienced by Union forces at Cold Harbor nearly a year and a half later. Coming in the wake of midterm election setbacks and less than three weeks before the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, the results of the battle triggered a political crisis in Abraham Lincoln's administration involving key members of his cabinet.

That said, one might well wonder why we need another account of that battle. After all, the general story is rather well known: there is something of the Norse saga that requires retelling within much of what passes for Civil War military history. And even if a book on Fredericksburg

does not carry the commercial promise of, say, yet another account of the Gettysburg campaign or Robert E. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia, the fact that two books on the campaign appeared within the year suggests that the subject retains sufficient interest. But George C. Rable's recounting of the campaign deserves special notice, now more than ever, because it conveys much more than simply a tale of combat.

Readers (especially armchair generals) looking for a detailed analysis of the strategy and tactics of the Fredericksburg campaign may well be disappointed to find that Rable often glosses over the various options available to the opposing commanders, at most alluding to options before plunging ahead with what came next. Nor is there much in Rable's account that will surprise those readers already familiar with the course and context of the campaign. What Rable succeeds in doing, in spectacular fashion, is to offer us an intensely human account of a single campaign. Laid before us are the rivalries between generals in the Army of the Potomac: at times it appears that various commanders were more interested in waging

war against each other than in attacking the Confederates. Miscommunication and confusion laid on top of ambition doomed an already problematic plan of attack. Even Lincoln, who resented congressional interference in cabinet divisions, was not above listening to generals berate each other: his open-door policy at the least facilitated this atmosphere of intrigue that Rable attributes to McClellan's influence.

If that story is told in greater detail than ever before, still it will not come as news to many readers that the officer corps of the Army of the Potomac had issues, to put it mildly. Rather, it is in Rable's account of the experiences of the common soldiers and line and field officers that his book carries a more profound message. Offering a rather dismal portrait of the experiences of the camp and the march as well as the harrowing and horrific environment of combat, Rable forces readers to wonder why anyone would have put up with it all. Soldiers encountered dirty and disease-ridden camps; they speculated about what would happen next as they awaited letters from home, bit into indigestible food, or grumbled about the exorbitant prices charged by sutlers. Marches were exhausting in the best of times, especially when shoes fell apart; bad weather, especially rain and cold, made the barely passable miserable, and never more so than in the macabre carnival known as the Mud March of January 1863. Perhaps mounting frustration and anger with such conditions contributed to an increasingly harsh attitude toward life in general and civilians in particular, as the war became more brutal in its impact on all involved. As Rable suggests, concerns about the coarsening and degeneration of moral sensibilities were not ill-founded: military service had a corrosive impact on many of those who served.

Seen in this light, the experience of combat, especially for Union soldiers assailing Marye's Heights, raises important questions. Despite flashes of humanity, the battle itself reminds us that

war means fighting, and fighting means killing--and dying. If some saw something particularly heroic in combat, others participated in something that was brutal. Whether one was a Union soldier in George Meade's division looking for supports that never came or one of the many men who stormed Marye's Heights only to be ripped apart by Confederate fire, there was something almost surreal about Fredericksburg. Whatever chance of success the Union offensive enjoyed soon dissipated, yet the attacks continued. It is said that as he watched this slaughter, Robert E. Lee remarked, "It is well that war is so terrible--we should grow too fond of it!" The comment is far more revealing of how Lee found battle stimulating than a reflection of how the men on the ground felt--at least those not already dead.

For those men to persist in light of horror alternating with futility and frustration suggests that a different sort of grim courage sustained many soldiers. For these men were still largely the boys of '61, the volunteers who had rallied around the colors in the aftermath of Sumter. One cannot but imagine what it was like for the men of the Irish Brigade, fresh off their assault upon the Sunken Road at Antietam, to confront yet another sunken road bristling with Confederate rifles and supported by artillery; one wonders what it was like to be a member of the 5th New York, overrun at Second Manassas, scrambling back across the Rappahannock as the engineers began taking up the pontoon bridges. Yet many of these men would fight again, and one wonders why, after emerging from such an immersive and engrossing narrative. Then there were those who suffered in field hospitals or who decided that they indeed had taken enough (many soldiers in the 5th New York had signed up for two years, and the regiment would cease to exist the following May).

It is this detailed retelling of the soldier experience in all its aspects that distinguishes Rable's account. He has drawn upon the large literature on this subject and grounded it in a specific con-

text, much as J. Tracy Power did in his *Lee's Miserables* (1998). The result is the most detailed study to date about the soldier's experience grounded in a single battle. Yet Rable is interested in more than that, for he places Fredericksburg in a larger if familiar context. The battle itself was more a Union defeat than it was a Confederate victory: Lee muttered that it was an incomplete triumph while Lincoln, of all people, observed that even at the rate of attrition seen at Fredericksburg the Union would eventually prevail. The president survived a political challenge in the wake of the defeat, and kept his promise to issue the Emancipation Proclamation. In the long term, the battle was simply another in a series of clashes between Union and Confederate armies in the East where each side maintained home field advantage: more men would fall at Chancellorsville and Gettysburg than at Fredericksburg, and over forty days of nearly continuous combat in May and June 1864 would show how fierce and unrelenting bloodshed could become. Yet Fredericksburg would always hold a special place as a symbol of futility and sacrifice.

Rable's account is more about the bluecoats than it is about the butternuts; although he offers an extended discussion of the impact of the campaign upon civilians, especially the residents of Fredericksburg, in the end generals and soldiers dominate the narrative. For the most part he handles his story with assurance, although it is only right to note the occasional (and perhaps inevitable) slip in detail, as when Rable refers multiple times to Colonel Edward E. Cross of the 5th New Hampshire as Robert E. Cross. Quibbles aside, however, Rable has offered us a reflective account of a battle that has long haunted Americans and suggests why it might haunt us still.

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