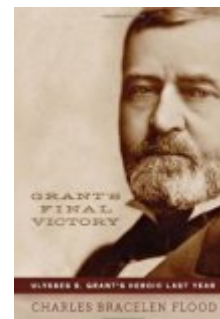


Charles Bracelen Flood. *Grant's Final Victory: Ulysses S. Grant's Heroic Last Year.* Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2011. 320 pp. \$27.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-306-82028-1.



Reviewed by Timothy J. Orr

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Commissioned by Martin P. Johnson (Miami University Hamilton)

In *Grant's Final Victory*, Charles Bracelen Flood examines the last fourteen months of life of America's eighteenth president. It is a narrative history describing Ulysses S. Grant's loss of fortune, his diagnosis with terminal throat cancer, and his effort to put his memories of the Civil War into words before the cold embrace of death set in. Flood's book has no discernible argument, but his narrative paints a heroic picture of Grant, depicting him as a man of determination, firmly resolved to fix every problem affecting his family and reputation until death called him elsewhere.

Flood's book begins in May 1884, with the collapse of Grant's Wall Street firm. That month, newspapers broke the news that Grant's business partner, Ferdinand Ward, in collusion with the president of New York City's Marine Bank, James D. Fish, had swindled investors out of more than sixteen million dollars. The resulting financial disaster propelled Grant's family into ruin. Then, on June 2, less than one month after this ill news, Grant experienced terrible throat pain. By October, physicians determined that he suffered from

terminal throat cancer, the result of decades of cigar smoking. But, just as fate gusted in a dark cloud, the hand of providence offered Grant one final opportunity for greatness. In June 1884, he participated in several commemorative exercises. Cheering crowds thronged to see him, all anxious to hear an anecdote or two from the famous Union general. In July, convinced that his war stories were worth telling, Grant agreed to write several short narratives for *Century Magazine*. He discovered that he possessed an inimitable talent, bringing the Civil War's drama to life in epic fashion. By September, reinforced with the support of Mark Twain as publisher and Adam Badeau (a former member of his staff) as editorial assistant, Grant embarked on the task of crafting his memoir. From September 1884 to July 20, 1885, the last day he ever wrote, Grant completed a 1,215-page tome, averaging 750 words per day. Three days after completing his masterpiece, Grant died. The effort proved worth it; the postmortem publication of *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant* (1885) lifted his family out of its dire financial straits and it

elevated Grant's reputation--which had suffered because of his scandal-ridden presidency and his unknowing aid to the criminal Ward--back to the level of national hero.

Overall, *Grant's Final Victory* is a wonderful read. Of course, it is solely a narrative. There is no thesis, no introduction, and no conclusion. The curtain closes with Grant's funeral cortege. Flood might be faulted for not explicitly stating his theme, but his book's intentions can be deciphered with a reasonable amount of guesswork. The author presents Grant's final year as an inspiring tale of determination in the face of daunting odds. Ultimately, his book offers an account of sincere humanity. As Grant's final fourteen months wound down, he faced unnerving challenges that tested his character. For instance, when Grant encountered obstacles that prevented him from finishing his memoir, he found success in resurrecting the efficacious character traits of his youth. As a result, each chapter, in addition to narrating the events of 1884 to 1885, also offers a brief flashback to a previous point in Grant's life. Although this sometimes produces a choppy narrative, it reminds readers of what it meant--and still means--to live a full, successful life. As the body fails, the value of experience increases, rendering it easier for a person to negotiate life's emotional perils. Perhaps the most illustrative example comes in chapter 13, when Grant's prideful assistant, Badeau, blackmailed Grant, demanding a higher salary or else threatening to go to the press to claim that he, not Grant, was the true author of the *Memoirs*. In an even-tempered and direct letter, Grant calmly chided Badeau and then relieved him of his duties. Flood characterized the moment well: "Badeau failed to realize that he was now addressing a man who was not only a general, but a man who had discovered that he loved to write, was proud of what he was doing for himself, his wife, and the nation, and intended to die doing it" (p. 172). Grant explained to Badeau, "I understand you better than you understand yourself. You are petulant, your anger is

easily aroused and you are overbearing even to me at times, and always with those for whom you have done, or are doing, literary work.... You have no idea of this yourself, but it has frequently happened with me. I have abstained from bringing it to your notice at the time, by ceasing to talk, or by half acquiescing and then doing as I thought right afterwards" (p. 173).

Such examples will make this book appealing to more than just presidential scholars and Civil War historians. As death is something that affects us all, we might take inspiration from Grant and remember that he was more than a great general or a lackluster president, but a man who faced death heroically.

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