

The Nature of Sacrifice:A Biography of Charles Russell Lowell, Jr.

Richard F. Miller

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Review

Miller, Richard F.

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Bundy, Carol *The Nature of Sacrifice: A Biography of Charles Russell Lowell, Jr.* Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$30.00 hardcover ISBN 374120773

Gentleman soldier

The real story behind the eulogized Yankee

The South lost its cause and its men; a victorious North lost only men. For some Northerners however, not all losses were equal. Some deaths left larger legacies, usually by virtue of high birth, membership in families that could afford to publish posthumous memorials, or who boasted connections with the era's literati. Farmers, mechanics, and Harvard men had all streamed to the colors in 1861 and many did not return. But it is the Harvardians who have come down to us in Memorial Hall's stained glass windows, eulogized in the *Harvard Memorial Biographies* and often celebrated in poetry by Ralph Waldo Emerson, James Russell Lowell, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., and Herman Melville. In the half century after Appomattox this warrior-elite was further embedded in the national consciousness by living memorials such as William Francis Bartlett, in celebrated speeches by the likes (if not the very life) of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. and merchant prince Henry Lee Higginson, Civil War veteran and Boston Symphony founder. Their memories were well tended by the first generation of Civil War historians, some good Harvard men (and good friends of the deceased) like Francis Winthrop Palfrey and John Codman Ropes, or sympathetic gentlemen like Francis Amasa Walker. The result was a Northern (and of this, largely Northeastern) analogue to the South's roll of dead chivalry. This Martyrology has resided both on the white marble entablature empanelling Memorial Hall's somber transept or frozen on horseback on Saint-Gaudens's bronze panels across from the Massachusetts State House. And so they have come down to us in historical imagination, demanding a respect bordering on awe and possessing the cool of distant heroes, demi-legends separated by a gulf of time and social class from many of their fellow citizens, then and now.

In her fine biography, **The Nature of Sacrifice: A Biography of Charles Russell Lowell, Jr.**, Carol Bundy has rendered a great service to general readers and Civil War scholars alike by redeeming one of those enmarbled names and restoring the man--Charles Russell Lowell, Jr. Lowell's ancestral constellation included John Lowell, who inserted the anti-slavery clause in Massachusetts' first state constitution as well as the Jackson and Tracey clans, who founded one of America's early manufacturing fortunes as well as a city, Lowell, Massachusetts. Charles Russell Lowell, Jr.--Charlie to intimates--was nephew of poet James Russell Lowell, counted Ralph Waldo Emerson as a personal mentor and was valedictorian of Harvard College Class of 1854. Charlie spent two years traveling through Europe, where he joined a distinguished expatriate community in Florence that included authors Fanny Trollope, poets Robert and Elizabeth Browning, sculptors Hiram Powers and William Wetmore Story and future art historian Charles Eliot Norton. In Europe, Charlie retraced Hannibal's supposed route across the Alps, visited Germany, perfected his horsemanship in French Algeria, and toured Roman museums with Nathaniel Hawthorne. After returning to America, Lowell renewed his acquaintance with business tycoon John Murray Forbes, and was soon in Iowa, working as an executive for one of Forbes's railroads. Lowell proved a success, helping settle land claims and establish easements, a complicated business but critical for the railroad's future growth. From there, Lowell joined another of Forbes's establishments, an ironworks near Cumberland, Maryland.

By then it was autumn, 1860. With the beginning of war, Lowell would make his way to a beleaguered Washington, D.C. and eagerly offer his services to the government. Like untold others crowding enlistment offices, Charlie had no military experience. But he was a fine horseman, had impeccable connections, winning ways, and a first-rate mind. After a brief stint as Massachusetts' State Agent in Washington, Charlie was soon commissioned a captain in the regular cavalry.

To an outsider, Charlie's rØsumØ sparkles. But Carol Bundy takes the reader far below these surfaces to reveal a very different, as well as a second heroic figure from whom Charlie may well have learned all about sacrifice. The name of Anna Cabot Jackson Lowell, Charlie's mother, does not appear in Memorial Hall, but it is she to whom credit for Charlie's later accomplishments, even his very life, is clearly due. **The Nature of Sacrifice** is ultimately not just about Charlie's sacrifice of life as a distinguished cavalryman in a war that produced many noted horse soldiers, but also about one woman's sacrifice for

her family in the two decades preceding that war.

Charlie's grandparents were wealthy but his father, unsuited for business, lost his share of the inheritance and plunged his family into something worse than genteel poverty. There would be no second chances for Charles Lowell, Sr. His wife Anna seized the reins and went to work. She founded a successful school, wrote popular textbooks, and managed a household that included a crazy aunt, growing children, and a depressed, sometimes dysfunctional husband; that this same household eventually became a watering hole of Harvard University's student and professorial elite, is simply one more tribute to Anna Lowell. She earned the money to maintain the family homestead and send her two sons, Charlie and Jimmy, to Harvard.

Shortly after Charlie's graduation, he contracted tuberculosis, that scourge of the 19th century. The glamorous journey through Europe and Algeria, hobnobbing with artistes and authors was in fact a trip to save his life--at the time the best treatment for consumption was a warmer climate, clean air and exercise. For those who could afford this treatment, with luck or coincidence, the tubercular lesions might encapsulate and the disease would remit. Charlie's parents could not afford such a cure--luckily a wealthy grandmother could. Just as Carol Bundy skillfully takes the reader through the impact of sudden insolvency on the family's dynamic, so she also narrates the impact of potentially deadly illness on Charlie Lowell's world of friends and relations.

By the time the war begins, Carol Bundy has given readers ample background for Charlie's own rush to the colors. Gentlemanly class ideals stressing *civitas* and *noblesse*, influenced by maternal example, (and perhaps a desire to redeem his disgraced father's name) as well as the righting of wrongs--in Charlie's case, the crime of slavery and the threat of disunion (probably in that order)--became his personal responsibility. He rode with Stoneman's cavalry on the Peninsula and served as an ADC to McClellan. He so impressed his superiors that he was given the honor of personally delivering the rebel colors captured at Antietam to Secretary of War Stanton. In April of 1863 he was commissioned colonel of the 2nd Massachusetts Cavalry. For the next 16 months he waged a nasty counter-guerilla war against John Singleton Mosby in the Virginia counties around Washington.

It was an unconventional warfare that tested the limits of Lowell's gentleman-ethics. Having effectively developed Lowell's class and social milieu

for the reader, Bundy does a superb job of conveying her subject's struggles with the shadowy world of guerilla warfare. The boundaries between legitimate warfare and criminality were often crossed by both sides. Fortunately, there is a wealth of primary sources that enables Bundy to ably probe Lowell's side of these encounters. The result is a worthwhile exploration of how one prominent 19th century figure coped with a warfare that was veering towards a totality that became depressingly familiar to later generations.

Some readers may agree with Thomas Carlyle that Biography is the only true history, and in this sense, **The Nature of Sacrifice** is skillfully written biography. However, for military historians true history is also a function of campaigns, motion and units, and Bundy's book should not be confused with campaign studies of the battles in which Lowell fought. This probably goes with the biographical genre. What does not go with the genre however, are the factual errors which mar this book. To mention a few: Henry Lee and Albert Galitan Browne may have had impeccable social credentials but neither man was untainted by liberal politics (Lee had helped found Massachusetts's Free Soil Party and Browne was a passionate abolitionist); Salmon P. Chase was not the former senator from Pennsylvania; (he was governor and then senator from Ohio); Edward Baker was not a man with no military experience (he had commanded a brigade at Cerro Gordo in 1846); Lt. Col. Francis Winthrop Palfrey was not slightly wounded at Ball's Bluff (he was not present at the battle); Neither Paul Revere nor Henry Ropes were killed during Pickett's Charge (Revere was mortally wounded on July 2 and Ropes died from friendly fire hours before the Confederate charge) and the 20th Massachusetts did not muster out of service in 1864 (it remained as a Veteran Volunteer regiment through July, 1865). While Ms. Bundy is entitled to her own judgments--although few historians would probably agree with her opinion that Lowell's decisive leadership during Sheridan's Winchester fight in October, 1864, had given Lincoln the victory for reelection--she is not entitled to her own facts. Fortunately for **The Nature of Sacrifice**, the factual errors, while nettlesome, are not central to the narrative and will hopefully be corrected in subsequent printings.

As Civil War eulogists were fond of noting (often by necessity), it was not the length of years that distinguished a life, but the important events which filled them. Charlie Lowell's life was filled with plenty of important events and people and Carol Bundy has made a valuable contribution to both Civil War history and American biography. Thirty dollars for this book is no sacrifice at all but rather

money well spent in exchange for a glimpse of the man previously visible only in marble.

Richard F. Miller is a Fellow of the Massachusetts Historical Society, author of Harvard's Civil War: The History of the Twentieth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry (University Press of New England, Fall, 2005), A Carrier at War: Onboard the U.S.S. Kitty Hawk in the Iraq War, (Brassey's, Summer, 2005) and co-author of The Civil War: The Nantucket Experience, (Wesco Publishing, 1994).