

The Sword of Lincoln: The Army of the Potomac

Russel H. Beatie

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Recommended Citation

Beatie, Russel H. (2005) "The Sword of Lincoln: The Army of the Potomac," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 7 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.7.3.26

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol7/iss3/26>

Review

Beatie, Russel H.

Summer 2005

Wert, Jeffrey D. *The Sword of Lincoln:The Army of the Potomac*. Simon & Schuster, \$30.00 hardcover ISBN 743225066

Comprehensive combat history

Wert takes a stab with single volume

If an award is available to persons who undertake historical tasks of extraordinary difficulty, Jeff Wert should have it. His one-volume history of the Army of the Potomac, in the face of the daunting amount of material available on the subject, is an excellent effort. Over time, one volume histories have been written by William Swinton and J.H. Stine in the 19th Century and for the years 1861 to 1863 by Samuel L. French in the early 20th Century. More recently, Bruce Catton wrote three volumes devoted primarily to the enlisted men, volume three, *A Stillness at Appomattox*, winning a Pulitzer Prize. Others have written works not focused solely on the Army of the Potomac but nevertheless devoted primarily to that army, for example, K.P. Williams's *Lincoln Finds A General* (five volumes that went unfinished because of Williams' untimely death), T. Harry Williams, *Lincoln and his Generals* and Warren Hassler's *Commanders of the Army of the Potomac*. None of these works undertook or accomplished the great sweep of Wert's volume, which tells us about the performance and the reactions of the enlisted men, the performance and reactions of the general officers, and the relation of political, social, and economic circumstances to the fate of the army and its commanders. The sources, both primary and secondary, are not encyclopedic in the literal sense of that word, but even with a lifetime and unlimited resources, no human being can possibly accomplish that undertaking. Nevertheless, the sources are as complete as necessary, produce a full, accurate picture and include some not seen in any other work.

On the broad general aspects of the Army ("the army believed . . .", "the generals thought . . .", "the staff officers could not . . .") the volume of material available on the Army of the Potomac presents the possibility for a well

organized quantitative history if a superman were available to bring the sources together. Leaving aside the Herculean --and impossible--task of quantitative history, one must take a reasonable position short of the mindless anecdotal narrative. For example, in a personal exchange Professor James McPherson told me he drew on 20,000 letter collections for his book *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War*; and that was a sampling. The difficulty for the historian in Wert's position rests on the surface: the sources present support for every conceivable view and every conceivable opinion and every conceivable historical conclusion about the army and its men. Some extraordinary and incredible inferences and conclusions have been drawn about the Army of the Potomac and its leaders, many of which reveal writers "tyrannized by the democracy of ideas and information." Wert navigated the sources successfully and came to port safely with a fine product filled with reliable and sound--even if debatable--conclusions.

He does not evade the difficult questions or the difficult analyses; and although reasonable men could differ with some of his historical conclusions, everything he writes and every conclusion he draws has more than adequate support in the sources. For example, I disagree with some of his conclusions about some of the higher ranking officers and some of the long debated issues; but all these subjects will still appear on the list of topics for debate long after he and I have ceased our participation in the discussions--and that makes the American Civil War a continuing, vibrant topic.

This is not a "revisionist" history for the sake of revisionism but is a sound treatment of one of the most controversial armies ever to serve under the American flag. Wert makes his points in many different ways: sharp use of anecdotal accounts, quotations from primary sources, and as he must in a limited work, judicious use of the best secondary sources. Even though the experienced reader will not be able to follow his favorite officer, regiment, or brigade through battle after battle, the battle accounts and maps have good structure and clarity.

Longtime, devoted students of the war and of the army may read this work and conclude that they did not find startling new information or startling new insights into the history of the Army of the Potomac, but all others--emphasis on "all"--will find it both entertaining and informative. I recommend Wert's book to all these students and to any others whose interest in the Army of the Potomac or the American Civil War encompasses a work that will bring to their attention nuances and facts and sources they have not encountered in the past.

Russel H. Cap Beatie, a former army lieutenant, is a graduate of Princeton University and Columbia Law School. He has been a trial lawyer in New York City for almost four decades. Beatie's previous book is Road to Manassas (1961).