

### Tarnished Victory: Finishing Lincoln's War

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## Review

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**Marvel, William** *Tarnished Victory: Finishing Lincoln's War*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, \$35.00 ISBN 978-0-547-42806-2

### Understanding the War's End

William Marvel is a Lincoln Prize-winning historian of the Civil War. Wide-ranging research and page-turning prose mark his books. He is a widely-read and respected author, so it would be simple for a reviewer to praise this latest effort and leave it at that. Imitating Marvel's own emphasis on the negative, however, such an approach would not present the whole story.

In the "Source and Acknowledgements" section of this book, the final volume of his four-volume history of the Civil War, Marvel repeats again his insistence on the use of contemporary sources and the non-use of memoirs or writings produced "very long after the fact." Contemporary writing has to be "weighed for motive or misapprehension," he says, but he clearly believes that something written after the event cannot be trusted at all (455).

Any reading of this book demonstrates clearly that Marvel follows his beliefs. Memoirs are nowhere to be seen nor are magazines or newspapers produced after the war. Letters, diaries, newspaper reports, and other contemporary materials serve as the almost exclusive basis for Marvel's text. Conspicuously missing are secondary books and articles. There are few biographies, monographs, or major syntheses to be found. Marvel seems to be indicating that the historian's task does not include studying and evaluating the work of earlier historians or the remembrances of participants in the war.

While I was reading this book and mulling Marvel's methodology, my wife and I were traveling in England. There I came across an explanatory panel in a museum discussing the study of the history of medieval Whitby Abbey. The text struck me. A curator had written that often the historical record "may be

incomplete. Pieces might be lost. Their author might be biased or forgetful. So we need to read them carefully, and to find other sources of evidence to check them against."

Surely both Marvel and this unknown museum curator agree on the importance of using primary sources. However, Marvel's definition concludes that historical truth can only be found in a narrow type of documentation, while the historian in England is more wide-ranging.

Marvel's book is a repudiation of what he believes has been a triumphant interpretation of the Civil War. Earlier historians, he believes, have emphasized that men of heroic stature saved the Union and ended slavery. In fact, he argues, the war displayed "military ineptitude and political perfidy," and "the restored Union was no longer a voluntary community," and it "did not really eradicate human bondage" (xiii). The last years of the Civil War were no happy time for the United States, Marvel insists; they were a dark time of depression, corruption, death, and mutilation caused by Federal incompetents. (Unfortunately, we do not know how the Confederates felt because Marvel does not include them in his narration.)

Much of what Marvel states in this book is not new to historians, but more casual readers might be surprised. To many Americans, the Civil War was indeed an extraordinarily glorious event, so Marvel's emphasis on its dark side serves a purpose in righting the balance.

Yet, this book seems to forget that every war produces grouching by soldiers, civilians, and politicians, and these complaints have to be taken in context. Wars regularly warp or destroy economies and create inefficient and corrupt bureaucracies. No matter how a draft is established, there are inequities. No president, not even Lincoln, is a perfect leader. And if the war must be condemned because it really did not end slavery, how then can this book indicate that so-called Radicals who fought for just that result were villains? How can Marvel ignore the modern studies of Ulysses S. Grant and the contemporary respect for him as general and president, while labeling his successful war-ending campaign in Virginia not as efficient as George B. McClellan's earlier activities?

Such issues and others like them demonstrate the necessity for using every source available, whether primary or secondary, and interpreting such material

thoroughly in the widest context. Otherwise, an author risks an incomplete story.

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