

General Grant and the Rewriting of History: How the Destruction of General William S. Rosecrans Influenced Our Understanding of the Civil War

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Review

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Varney, Frank P. *General Grant and the Rewriting of History: How the Destruction of General William S. Rosecrans Influenced Our Understanding of the Civil War.* Savas Beatie, \$32.95 ISBN 978-1-61121-118-4

A Reconsideration of an Civil War Hero

This book makes a compelling argument that Ulysses S. Grant was a master manipulator. Not only did Grant manipulate the historical record to enhance his reputation at the cost of destroying others, in this case General William S. Rosecrans, but he has also manipulated historians, many of whom have accepted Grant's version without question. These are both bold claims and Varney is prepared to back them up with his meticulous research.

The somewhat ponderous title of the book is a little misleading. At first I was under the impression that it was Varney that would be rewriting history, and I suppose to some extent he has tried to do so. Apparently Varney's original title was "The Man Grant Didn't Like" a much clearer indication of what this book was all about. Ultimately the true topic of this book is also a little confusing – is it about Grant? Is it about Rosecrans? Is it about historical memory? Or is it a lesson to historians to be more critical of their sources? It touches on all of these subject – some more successfully than others.

Varney hits hard and strong. His preface makes his argument very clear and it is followed by a chapter that considers what we know and ends with asking what we know now. Each chapter deals with a particular incident or battle and has a similar format. Varney sets the context, lists the controversies, and then deals with them one by one. In some chapters he examines what historians say and each ends with an evaluation, and a rewriting of the historiography. All in all Varney does what he intends to do and demonstrates a pattern of deceit on the part of Grant and a maligning of William Rosecrans.

Does Varney make his case? His systematic examination of the evidence certainly supports his argument that Rosecrans's reputation was disparaged and his war career deserves to be re-evaluated. However his sweeping criticisms, particularly of academic historians, were a little harder to swallow. Although I do not profess to be intimately familiar with the scholarship on Grant I do know that academic historians are trained to ask questions of their sources. Even in my undergraduate classes I ask students to think about why a source was created and who was the intended audience? In that way they are alerted to the fact that there may be a hidden agenda and we cannot accept what is written at face value. Whether those scholars he (politely) takes to task have been guilty of such a fundamental error I cannot be sure but it seems unlikely. I was also puzzled as to why there was no mention, even in the bibliography, of Joan Waugh's most recent and award winning biography of Grant.

Nevertheless Varney does make his point that Grant manipulated the record to the detriment of Rosecrans and alerts us several times to the fact that he intends to prove Grant's deceptive practices yet again in a second volume dealing with Grant's treatment of other officers. I am not sure Varney needs another round and I would much rather see this author using his methodical and remedial research to give us a fresh biography of the much maligned Rosecrans which he himself claims is greatly overdue.

The Appendix consists of an interview with the author in which he explains his interests, his five years of research and the templates for each chapter. He ends by telling us what he wanted the reader to come away with. His first four goals, that Grant was more than willing to take credit that was due to others; that he frequently manipulated the truth and would actively work to malign those he disliked; and that Rosecrans deserves more credit for his wartime accomplishments that he has received, are all well argued. His final objective however, to demonstrate that history is complex and that primary sources must be re-examined by each and every historian is surely something of which all academically trained historians are aware.

There will undoubtedly be an audience for this work and perhaps some fresh and more critical examinations of Grant. Furthermore this will stimulate conversation and that in itself is an admirable achievement.

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from the Sea: Resistance on the Confederate Home Front (*UNC, 2003*) and is currently researching Civil War occupation of New Orleans under Benjamin Butler.