

Their Last Full Measure: The Final Days of the Civil War

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Review

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Wheelan, Joseph *Their Last Full Measure: The Final Days of the Civil War*. Da Capo, \$33.50 ISBN 9780306823602

The War's Final Months in Vivid and Entertaining Detail

For four long years the Union and the Confederacy fought seemingly endless battles in hopes of an eventual victory. The tides of war ebbed and flowed constantly, leaving soldiers and civilians alike to only speculate when and how the conflict might end. Only in the early months of 1865 did it finally become obvious that the Union would win a decisive victory over its Confederate counterpart. For this reason, the first half of 1865 was one of the most critical periods in American history because the inevitable defeat of the Confederacy changed the entire trajectory of American society and culture. Author Joseph Wheelan, who has previously chronicled the Overland Campaign in *Bloody Spring: Four Days that Sealed the Confederacy's Fate*, provides a detailed look at the closing months of the Civil War. Utilizing his trademark style of weaving together the stories of the men and women who endured the war on the battlefield and the home-front, Wheelan once again brings to life a critical crossroad of the United States' most destructive war.

As in his previous works, Wheelan's greatest strengths as a writer of this period lie in his attention to detail. Devoting each chapter to one month of 1865, Wheelan focused the majority of his attention on General Ulysses S. Grant's campaign against Petersburg and Richmond and General William T. Sherman's march through the Carolinas. His descriptions of military events include the Petersburg siege, the capture of Fort Fisher in North Carolina, the burning of Columbia, the attack on Fort Stedman, the surrender of Generals Robert E. Lee and Joseph E. Johnston, and many others. At the same time, Wheelan did not neglect the civilian side of the war because he included discussions of Confederate morale during Sherman's march, the Hampton Road's Peace Conference, and President Lincoln's visits to the front lines. The most extensive

detail, however, was reserved for the month of April. Comprising almost half of the book, this chapter takes the reader through the final capture of Richmond and Petersburg, the pursuit of Lee through Virginia, and the final surrender at Appomattox that effectively ended meaningful Confederate resistance. Throughout the manuscript, Wheelan takes care to not just describe military maneuvers but also human interest stories to grab the reader's attention. For example, on page 95 Wheelan notes the Union policy of foraging through the Confederate countryside in Georgia and the Carolinas and the "eye for an eye" killings between Union and Confederate soldiers that followed. Other entertaining stories included Vice President Andrew Johnson getting drunk before being sworn into office along with Confederate states that refused to send their militias beyond their borders even when the survival of Confederate armies was at stake. By far one of the most vivid stories came on page 302, when Wheelan mentioned that the Union sergeant who helped capture John Wilkes Booth after Lincoln's assassination was so devoted to his religious faith that he had castrated himself when tempted by prostitutes. These stories, and many others, make the closing months of the war come alive.

In addition, Wheelan provides several interesting perspectives about the end of the war. Specifically, in his discussion on the multiple efforts to end the war before the spring of 1865, he argues that the failures of these endeavors lay mainly with Jefferson Davis, who wished to fight to the end against all the odds. He thus implied that peace efforts never had a chance to succeed because Davis would never accept anything that did not include Confederate independence. In addition, he argues that the Union victory mainly came from the strategic and tactical skills of the top three Union generals: Grant, Sherman, and Philip Sheridan. Describing their exploits on and off the battlefield, Wheelan reinforces the idea that the Union won the war just as much as the Confederates lost it. Finally, in his best analysis, Wheelan asserted that Lincoln's vision of the postwar world was best symbolized by the Union-sponsored government in Louisiana. Even though Lincoln had endorsed several other unionist movements across the South, including Virginia, Tennessee and Arkansas, Lincoln cited Louisiana in the last public speech of his life. As Wheelan wrote on page 269, Louisiana represented "reconciliation with the South...predicated on the South's recommitment to the Union and its acceptance of black emancipation." This insight should give students of Reconstruction an important insight into its origins.

Nevertheless, as in his earlier book on the Overland Campaign, Wheelan spends so much time describing so many events that he did not have enough space to go into much analytical discussion on the broader themes of the era. Most of the subjects to which he devotes the most space are well known to students of the Civil War and so will not add much new insight beyond description. In addition, with so much emphasis on military maneuvers, several important subjects that he mentioned briefly needed further elaboration to show their critical influence on the end of the conflict. For example, Wheelan mentions several times the Confederate attempts to arm black soldiers but did not analyze what such a move meant for Confederates and their attitudes about slavery versus independence by 1865. Also, the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment only received scant treatment even though it represented the culmination of the Union's shift from fighting a war solely for Union to one that also ended slavery. Further analyzing the effects of the Thirteenth Amendment on the final months of the war would have brought that significant change to the Constitution into greater perspective. And although half of the book detailed the end of major fighting in April, the chapter on May looked simply like an afterthought even though it represented the first attempts to bring the defeated southern states back into the Union and define the legacy of the war. The year 1865 did not just represent the end of the largest conflict in American history but also the beginnings of the modern United States. A study such as this should give more emphasis on the efforts to rebuild the nation as well as the end of the shooting.

Overall, this book provides a useful and entertaining study of the final months of the Civil War. While lacking in historiographical analysis, readers will still learn the ins and outs of how and why the war ended the way it did.

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