

William Tecumseh Sherman In The Service Of My Country: A Life

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Review

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McDonough, James Lee *William Tecumseh Sherman In the Service of my Country: A Life*. W.W. Norton & Company, \$39.95 ISBN 9780393241570

The Continuing Relevance of William Sherman

When William Sherman was yet a cadet at West Point, he proudly declared himself “in the service of my country” (161). James McDonough chronicles this journey of service that brought Sherman from humble cadet to full general in *William Tecumseh Sherman: In the Service of My Country: A Life*. Among the more notable themes McDonough explores throughout the hefty work are Sherman’s growth; his mastery of logistics, maneuver, and risk; and his resiliency.

Harry Williams considered Sherman to be one of the North’s two most outstanding examples of growth as a general. (Grant was the other.) Nearly each chapter of McDonough’s narrative provides some example of this phenomenon. It is easy to appreciate what Sherman became by understanding his formative experiences.

Almost immediately after graduating from West Point, Sherman began developing a “distrust of the American Political landscape” that McDonough notes “hardened in the following months and years” (65). Sherman decided early he wanted no part of politics, and he would never change. “Not even decades later,” McDonough notes, “when he knew that he probably could be the nation’s president if he so desired” (66). Instead, Sherman remained on the military side of serving his country, rising to general-in-chief, but with the position, enduring the “inevitable frustrations” of the “Washington political scene” (702).

Sherman is perhaps most widely associated in the common conscious with the increasing tendency toward total war that developed during the Civil War. McDonough traces the origins of Sherman’s experience with the concept to his service during the Seminole War where he witnessed the efficiency of Colonel

William Worth's policy of raiding Seminole villages, burning their huts, and destroying their corn. Sherman did not forget the tactic, and resurfaced the concept "with a vengeance during the Civil War, at the expense of the Confederacy" (69).

This experience in Florida was just one of Sherman's pre-war postings in the South. He also served four years at Fort Moultrie on Sullivan's Island outside Charleston, South Carolina, the very birthplace of secession. On the eve of the Civil War, he found himself as the superintendent of the Louisiana State Seminary of Learning (the forerunner of Louisiana State University) and watched as the South prepared for war. These experiences provided Sherman with a valuable frame of reference about the Southern people and region, and he put this knowledge to good effect. Of his most famous Civil War campaign, Sherman reported, "I knew more of Georgia than the rebels did" (87).

Perhaps most significant in Sherman's development was his ever-deepening relationship with Ulysses Grant, which began during the Fort Donelson Campaign (309). After the two beat back near defeat at Shiloh, criticism of Grant's unpreparedness on the first day of the battle brought Grant to the brink of leaving the Army. Sherman encouraged Grant to stay, and in so doing, "rendered a major service to his country" (327). He also took their relationship to a new level of trust and respect, and the two generals would ultimately execute the synchronized strategy that brought the Union victory.

After Shiloh, Sherman was plagued by Southern guerrillas that infested the countryside around Memphis and throughout western Tennessee. He developed a policy of "collective responsibility" that held "the whole neighborhood fully responsible" whenever guerrillas attacked his troops (338). It was the same concept that Sherman would practice as he swept across Georgia, explaining to Henry Halleck that "we are not only fighting hostile armies, but a hostile people, and must make old and young, rich and poor, feel the hard hand of war, as well as their organized armies."

When it came time for that famous march, Sherman divided his army into two wings on separate routes. This configuration served Sherman well, allowing him to keep the enemy guessing about the army's destination, facilitate foraging, and expand the swath of destruction. Sherman had experimented with the same tactic on his Meridian Campaign after Vicksburg, and gained "firsthand convincing evidence that he could lead an army through the heart of Rebel

territory, living off the land with no supply line whatsoever, and the enemy could not stop him” (454). Armed with this experience, Sherman replicated it in Georgia on a much larger scale (562).

In addition to chronicling Sherman’s growth as a general, McDonough reinforces the common assessment that Sherman’s genius lay in logistics and maneuver. It was Sherman’s grasp of logistics that McDonough notes enabled him “to supply his armies, as well as feed the thousands of animals those forces required, while seizing and maintaining the offensive against the Rebel army. The closer he drew to Atlanta, the longer grew his line of communications, and the more impressive was this achievement” (325). Atlanta also proved Sherman’s mastery of maneuver warfare. “Time and again,” McDonough reports, “he successfully performed turning movements, enabling him to maintain the offensive initiative, avoid the enemy’s strongpoints, exploit the enemy’s vulnerability and largely determine the course of combat, thus presenting his opponent the undesirable choice of retreating or accepting battle” (549-550). McDonough cites Sherman’s expertise with logistics and maneuver as “among the most significant reasons that he has long been more relevant than other generals of the American Civil War” (550).

Sherman is also admired by modern day students of the military art for his capacity to manage risk, and his marches deep into enemy territory such as the Meridian and Atlanta Campaigns are obvious examples. McDonough does service to this aspect of Sherman’s military genius by also noting the risk Sherman handled in dealing with John Bell Hood’s move to Tennessee after the Battle of Atlanta. Leaving George Thomas to deal with Hood, knowing that Andrew Jackson Smith was speeding Union reinforcements to Nashville, Sherman found the risk posed by Hood acceptable relative to the devastation Sherman anticipated inflicting on the Confederate psyche during his march across Georgia. Sherman, McDonough astutely observes, had become “a master at calculating risks” (579).

McDonough also highlights Sherman’s resiliency. His pre-Civil War career was “increasingly hard and, for the most part, unrewarding” (62). It included service in California where he “never once engaged in combat, while his West Point peers were winning military laurels in Mexico.” The experience, McDonough notes, “proved keenly disappointing and even embarrassing to a man of Sherman’s abilities, ambition and dedication to the armed services of his country” (124-125). Sherman resigned from the army only to be part of a failed

bank venture which included the loss of some \$130,000 he had invested for his army friends. Although the bank was not obligated to cover these losses, Sherman took it upon himself to make good the losses—even though his own investments were virtually depleted—in what McDonough calls “evidence of both an extraordinary high personal ethical standard and, more, a deep sense of military camaraderie” (213). Then of course there is Sherman’s failed command in Kentucky that brought with it charges he was “crazy.” Sherman recovered from this near disaster by “the proverbial godsend” of Fort Donelson that McDonough writes put Sherman “back in the war in a big way” (308).

At 816 pages, *William Tecumseh Sherman: In the Service of My Country: A Life* is not for the casual reader. Yet for one interested in exploring what McDonough advertises in the title: the life of a man’s service to his country, it is well worth the investment.

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