

December 2013

Custer's Road to Disaster: the Path to Little Big Horn

by Kevin M. Sullivan Morris Book Publishing LLC, USA 2013

reviewed by Carole Babyak

The Author covers Custer's early life, West Point Years and the Civil War; then goes over how Custer's personality led him to disregard warnings.

A short book only 190 pages it contains a lot of information, presenting incidences that made him disregard orders, so he could see his wife and other flaunting personality quirks that caused him to be demoted and degraded in the eyes of his superiors.

Why he did these things when he understood the Indians as well as other soldiers, and as the expression goes, no dummy, enhances the mystic. All of this swirls around the mystery and tragedy of Custer. Reading this book does give one a better understanding and it is a must for any Custer fan.

February 2014

The Last of the Blue and Gray: Old Men, Stolen Glory and the Mystery that Outlived the Civil War

by Richard Serrano

Smithsonian Inst., 2013, 192 pages

reviewed by Carole Babyak

This book covers the last surviving Civil War soldiers and men who claimed to have served but for whom examination of the records put their service in doubt.

Albert Woolson had watched the GAR membership dwindle. He passed away August 2, 1956, at the age of 109 (considering what the Civil War soldier endured and the lack of food during the war many soldiers did reach the age of 100). His life and declining years show he still marched, then rode, in parades, flew the flag and opened every letter, personally answering all he opened. He wrote and even talked on the phone to surviving Confederate soldiers. Woolson had said that we were fighting our brothers and there is no glory in that.

The passion that prompted these remaining soldiers to join their respective sides had softened; they shook hands and joked with each other at reunions. When Woolson passed away, the Confederate soldiers expressed condolences and regret, but what is very interesting about this book is the coverage of the Centennial commemorations of the Civil War. Gen. U.S. Grant III was chosen to head the committee. The South, fearing the North would promote and hold defeat over their heads, immediately began commemorations celebrating the creation of the Confederacy.

Reconstruction was still bitterly remembered; this turmoil did not talk of unity or peace and polarized the Civil Rights Movement. Madeline Williams was a black member of the New Jersey commission who

was denied staying at the Francis Marion Hotel in Charleston SC, where the committee was planning Ft. Sumter commemorations.

Gen. Grant III resigned and President Kennedy appointed Allan Nevins, who talked of the soldier's individual sacrifice. Edmund White suggested a day of mourning and Southern poet Robert Penn Warren commented that we were picking the scab of our fate.

The veterans embraced each other before they passed on, making people and politicians think peace and unity was here, however the scars of war were still causing pain.

March 2014

SMITHSONIAN CIVIL WAR: Inside the National Collection

Forward by Jon Meacham, Edited by Neil Kagen and Stephen G. Hyslop

Smithsonian Books, Washington DC, 2013, 357 pages

reviewed by Carole Babyak

This is a hefty, oversized book from Smithsonian Books, like art books, and you could call this one a work of art. The photographs make you think that the object is right in front of you, clear, and sparkling sharp.

As the title states, this is the collection. Uniforms, weapons, photographs, documents, stamps and letters, the coins and money of the era, even Mary Lincoln's jewelry and her blue velvet dress that appears like you could touch it. Varina Davis' crystalline wedding set of a necklace, bracelet and brooch is pictured as well as her emerald engagement ring.

The Generals and men that fought are represented with their stories and possessions. Unusual items like the copper plate used to print Confederate stamps, and Jefferson Davis' likeness seized by the U.S.S. Mercedita in 1862 is pictured. All the pictures have informative text. And the book is organized in a chronological order.

The Smithsonian has been called our nations attic but this book and the Civil War collection will not stay in the attic. This book is exquisite, and it will not gather dust on a table or book shelf; it contains too much.

April 2014

Don't Hurry Me Down to Hades: The Civil War in the Words of Those who Lived It

by Susannah J. Ural

Osprey Publishing Co., Oxford UK, New York, NY 2013, 214 pages

reviewed by Carole Babyak

The author is an Assoc. Prof. of History and a Senior Fellow at the Center for Study of War & Society at the U. of So. Mississippi. Her first book was *The Harp and the Eagle, Irish American Volunteers and the*

Union Army 1861-1865; others are *War, Citizens, Race, Ethnicity and Identity in America's Bloodiest Conflict* and she is working on a history of John Bell Hood's Texas Brigade.

The author begins the book with the goodbye from a wife to her soldier husband—Andromache to Hector, who is going to fight in the Trojan War. Trying to dispel gloom, Hector says “Don't hurry me down to Hades.”

Ural starts with the Battle of Balls Bluff as a soldier from the 1st Texas describes the battle from his view and a Union soldier from the 69th PA tells of his experiences. She continues describing Gettysburg from the Confederate and the Union sides.

Then we read of Charolette Forten, a free black residing in Philadelphia whose grandfather was a powder boy aboard a Revolutionary privateer. He made a fortune inventing and patenting a device for handling sails. Charolette went to the Sea Islands in South Carolina to help educate the former slaves. This life is contrasted by Louisiana's Kate Stone, who had to manage her family plantation, then after the war she wrote that slavery was wrong. We read of a black soldier and his family.

The attack on William Seward is seen through the eyes of his daughter Fanny. Clara Harris describes what happened when Booth shot Lincoln—she and her fiancé, Harry were invited to the theatre with the Lincolns. Harry Rathborne, whose arm was sliced that night, never recovered from the attack and their tragic end is described. In the conclusion, the author covers what the future held and how they all dealt with the events, even Hector and Andromache.