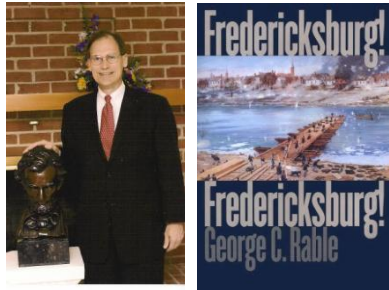


2003 LINCOLN PRIZE WINNER GEORGE C. RABLE FOR *FREDERICKSBURG!*

FREDERICKSBURG!



LINCOLN PRIZE ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

Gratitude does not come easily to human beings who have long tried to pretend and even live as if they were self-sufficient individuals regardless of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. This of course would be a particularly silly conceit for a writer. Especially for anyone fortunate enough to be awarded the Lincoln Prize, the expressions of gratitude had better be sustained and sincere. The first thanks of course must go to Richard Gilder and Lewis Lehrman whose generosity and tireless promotion of American history have placed us all in their debt. To the board of the Lincoln and Solders Institute and especially to its chairman, Gabor Boritt, and to the Lincoln Prize Jury, I offer my deepest appreciation.

Some talented people went out of their way to help some half-baked notions about the battle of Fredericksburg concocted a decade or so ago reach fruition. From the beginning Robert K. Krick and his staff generously and eagerly shared a massive amount of material accumulated at the Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park. Gary Gallagher provided an early opportunity to share some thoughts on the carnage of Fredericksburg and has always been a steady source of counsel and support. Gary along with David Perry at the University of North Carolina have been instrumental in the book's publication. Two historians whom I first met at Louisiana State University went far beyond any reasonable expectations for even longstanding friendships. Will Greene read the entire manuscript and forced me at many points to prune,

refocus, and better explain what I was about. Tom Schott improved every paragraph, nearly every sentence, with an editorial eye that is as unfailingly perceptive as it is unflinchingly honest. My greatest pleasure this evening is to have my wife Kay here. She not only used her superb skills as an interlibrary librarian to track down some of the more obscure items in the bibliography, but she daily reminds me in countless ways why so many of the men who fought at Fredericksburg so dearly loved their families. Daughters Anne and Katie await their mention no doubt expecting me to dwell on their wry skepticism about the value of all matters historical, but they will have to settle for a simple loving tribute to two wonderful young women.

For any work of history, there are two stories—the story told by the historian and the historian’s own story. A reader who persists to the last page will become quite familiar with the former but perhaps only dimly aware of the latter. Writing a book may be a mostly solitary activity, but it does not take place in a vacuum. We all come from some place and are connected to special people, and these places and people in turn shape our choices of topics and the ways we approach historical work.

Only a few days after this year’s official Lincoln Prize announcement, my mother Margaret J. Rable died at the age of 88. Mom had suffered from dementia for several years and was not even aware that Fredericksburg! Fredericksburg! had been published, but her spirit is in the book. She always used to say, “Hard work never killed anyone,” and I especially recall how she toiled many years in a high school cafeteria so her son could become the first in the family to attend college.

Aside from being hauled to a few historical sites on family vacations, I have no memories of acquiring any special interest in history as a young person. In high school, my academic interests ran mostly to mathematics and literature. Great novels, short stories, and complex poems are of course perfect for fostering and healing adolescent angst, but I was especially privileged to have fallen under the influence of a wonderful English teacher, Robert Robinson. Anyone who teaches a student to write in an exacting and demanding way is a true friend, and

especially for a working class student who knew nothing of higher education, Mr. Robinson helped smooth the way toward college work.

In the fall of 1968, a nervous freshman matriculated at Bluffton College, a small church-related liberal arts school in northwestern Ohio. I seriously considered studying mathematics, but in the first semester of my sophomore year I met the greatest teacher with whom I would work at any level. At that time, John D. Unruh, Jr. had not yet completed a dissertation that would later become the magisterial, award-winning study of overland migration to Oregon and California, The Plains Across. But that hardly mattered because John was at once a kind and demanding teacher. His infectious enthusiasm for history was inspiring even as you sank under what seemed an unimaginable load of work. One day, he stopped me after class and suggested graduate school, and I'm sure I had to ask, "What is graduate school?" The idea of becoming a college professor, much less actually writing history, surely lay beyond the scope of my limited imagination.

But like all great teachers, John Unruh could see things in students that they did not see in themselves, and so under his gentle guidance, I eventually applied to several graduate programs. I had slowly developed an interest in the Reconstruction period and would complete a long (and looking back on it rather tedious) senior honors thesis on the impeachment of Andrew Johnson.

At Unruh's suggestion, I had the good fortune to apply to Louisiana State University where T. Harry Williams had recently garnered a Pulitzer Prize among other national honors. After I had received several rejection letters from other schools, LSU not only admitted me but offered an assistantship. I had no idea whether I could do graduate work and had become certified as a secondary school teacher just in case things did not work out. At LSU, both T. Harry Williams and William J. Cooper, Jr., taught me a great deal about what it means to be a teacher and historian. I don't think I ever quite realized that it was real flesh and blood human beings who wrote books and articles so when Bill suggested I submit a revised seminar paper to an academic journal, he might as well have suggested flying off to Mars. For his part, Harry

Williams always had great faith in his students, and so he let me take on an overly ambitious dissertation topic—racial and political violence during Reconstruction across the entire South. He then proceeded to show by precept and example that any history worth doing should be well written. Like John Unruh, Harry Williams and Bill Cooper, each in their own way, became guiding lights for a student who needed a good deal of guiding light.

In the spring of 1976, one of those lights was suddenly extinguished when John Unruh died of a brain tumor at the age of 38—never having seen his book that would become part of the canon of western history. Three years later, another guiding light went out when T. Harry Williams died of emphysema. How many times, have I and many others longed to share some bit of news or receive some sage advice from John Unruh or T. Harry Williams.

Harry in particular would be quite amused by tonight's proceedings. As a graduate student, I took considerable pride in being a political historian—a field I considered vastly superior to stale old military history. But life is full of irony, and there are few people as naïve or shortsighted as a newly minted Ph.D.

Intellectually I have been something of a dilettante turning first to political violence during Reconstruction, then to southern women during the Civil War, and then to Confederate political culture before finally coming to the battle of Fredericksburg. But each project that a historian undertakes shapes future work, and I clearly could not have written Fredericksburg! Fredericksburg! without becoming immersed in the political and social history of the Civil War era. At the same time, the broad range of courses that I taught at Anderson University and at the University of Alabama forced me to engage a wide variety of subjects with students of varying backgrounds and abilities.

In a general way, the idea of writing a new type of battle study grew out of reading historian J. H. Hexter's old critique of what he termed "tunnel history." With great perception and sly humor, Hexter noted how most historians are satisfied to study a particular slice of human behavior, whether it be politics, economics, military affairs, society, and so on. These scholars

muck about in their own “tunnels” but seldom do the tunnels intersect. About ten years ago, I decided that as a Civil War historian I would like to try my hand at a battle study and perhaps dig into several tunnels at once. My general idea was ill-defined at best, and I also had to choose a battle. I have often been asked, “Why Fredericksburg?” One reason, I must confess, was that my old friends Will and Maggie Greene then lived in Fredericksburg and would put me up during research trips. More seriously, there was no modern full-scale study of the battle, and perhaps even more importantly, the campaign seemed tactically simple enough for a neophyte military historian to handle.

And that raised another question that I have often been asked. For being one of the larger and well-known battles of the war, why has Fredericksburg been so neglected? Any answer to that question must of course be largely speculative. Those interested in Confederate history have never found Fredericksburg very important—it seemed like far too easy a victory and Robert E. Lee himself always considered it a barren triumph. Historians interested in the Federal side would hardly want to dwell on such a devastating defeat. Indeed, for any student of the war, the story of Fredericksburg is in many respects profoundly depressing. In the immediate aftermath of the battle many of the Union soldiers talked of heavy losses with nothing gained, of horrible sacrifices with no purpose, of pointless butchery. Fredericksburg is perhaps a subject more suited to an existentialist or post-modernist than to a workaday historian.

Yet the very absence of glory, despite the valor of those Federals repeatedly charging that stone wall, made Fredericksburg more typical than not of most Civil War battles or perhaps battles generally. With over 12,000 Federal casualties and 5000 Confederate casualties, the proverbial butcher’s bill was high. But such numbers carry little meaning without some knowledge of the human beings involved. As I stumbled along in my research, I became increasingly interested in the lives of the soldiers who fought at Fredericksburg and in their families. I decided to blend the traditional elements of the battle study with the stories of the common soldier (and of civilians in both the Union and Confederacy) during three months of the

war. I hoped to recapture the lives of generals and privates alike during the Fredericksburg campaign and to place their experiences in a wider political, diplomatic, social, and cultural context.

Indeed the battle itself was connected to all sorts of people aside from the important generals such as Ambrose E. Burnside or Robert E. Lee. Clara Barton headed south to assist the wounded; Louisa May Alcott worked as a nurse in a Washington hospital. Walt Whitman traveled to Falmouth to look after his wounded brother; Herman Melville wrote a poem. In London, even Karl Marx fumed over military incompetence, and Henry Adams screwed up his courage to face another Union disaster. Somehow the war and even this battle mattered to everyone from the phrenologist who had offered a laughably silly reading of Burnside's character to the staid editor of the Scientific American who blamed the politicians and generals for the nation's woes. And so like a stone falling into a pond, the impact of Fredericksburg rippled across the country and indeed much of the western world.

My purpose was to treat the battle in this wider context. The study would have to examine the steady rhythms of military and civilian life and explore how the battle intersected with mundane and everyday matters in the armies and back home. The volunteer soldiers were never simply cogs in a military machine—they were husbands, sons, and brothers before they put on their uniforms and so they remained. They had occupations and they voted. The state of their stomachs surely affected how they interpreted the course of the war just as the routine and boredom of camp life along with marching, fighting, carnage and fear also influenced their morale.

The book logically fell into three substantial sections. The first deals with the period leading up to the battle. The place to begin is the condition of the Army of the Northern Virginia and the Army of the Potomac in early November 1862. The political context—Republican defeats in 1862 elections, the removal of McClellan and appointment of Burnside, and the diplomatic situation—all become critical to understanding the strategic decisions made on both

sides. The selection of the Fredericksburg route to Richmond and problems of army organization were equally important. The marching of the two armies toward Fredericksburg and the delayed arrival of the pontoons likewise affected the course and outcome of the campaign. The stalling of Burnside's advance toward Fredericksburg offered an opportunity for examining camp life in both armies, including the celebration of Thanksgiving, and how an early December cold snap, much grumbling among the soldiers as well as political impatience back home produced all kinds of conflicting predictions and rumors.

The second section deals with the fighting itself beginning with the preparations and expectations on the eve of the battle. This means weaving command decisions, the pontoon crossing on December 11, the Federal shelling of the town, the highly unusual street fighting, Burnside's battle plans, and the Confederate defenses into the experiences of junior officers and enlisted men. The same is true of the main fighting on December 13, everything from General George Gordon Meade's breakthrough on the Federal left to the fierce Confederate counterattacks, to the storied assaults by troops on the Federal right against the famous stone wall and Marye's Heights, everywhere the tactical decisions became enmeshed with the human anguish of the battle.

The third section proceeds from the withdrawal of Burnside's army back across the Rappahannock River to explore the battle's aftermath. Both sides had to come to grips with the carnage, but few battle studies dwell on this depressing subject in any depth. To me, however, it seemed vitally important to study the burials on the field, the transportation of corpses, the funerals back home, and the treatment of the wounded—whether in field hospitals or later in Washington or Richmond facilities. As eager consumers of newspapers, Union and Confederate soldiers realized that the world was paying a great deal of attention to what they had been doing. Those same newspapers also conveyed not only the first accounts of the battle itself but also some sense of the carnage in those depressingly long lists of dead and wounded that soon appeared in their columns.

Even the victorious Confederates had suffered significant losses, and so both sides had to look squarely into the face of a war that had seemingly spun out of human control. Ministers, and many soldiers, still talked of providence and the divine will, but there was an ineffable sadness in the United States during the Christmas season of 1862. Aside from the many people who had lost friends and family in the battle, no one felt any deeper sadness than Abraham Lincoln. Trying to comprehend the extent of the disaster, the President told one congressman that the litany of bad news would drive him “crazy.” He mused about trading places with a soldier sleeping on the cold ground or even one killed in battle. Finally in utter exasperation, he told a friend, “If there is a worse place than Hell, I am in it.” Of course, the political and military recriminations flew thick and fast. Soldiers themselves searched for someone to blame and hardly concealed their feelings from the home folks. Talk of demoralization and even desertion sounded serious and it was.

Yet like Lincoln who would stalwartly go ahead with the final Emancipation Proclamation only a few weeks after the Fredericksburg debacle, the majority of these soldiers, including many who complained the loudest, would persevere. As Lee’s Confederates exuded a confidence that reached dangerous levels, the men in the Army of the Potomac showed remarkable resilience. At what appeared to be an absolute low point in the history of the American republic, the sadness of the war hardly disappeared, but hope for the future could never be quite extinguished. Soldiers took stock of their lives. Some of course deserted the ranks, but many more stayed, and a number of these explained why they kept up the fight. The British politician and political philosopher Viscount Bolingbroke once asserted that a genuine patriotism “must be founded in great principles and supported by great virtues.” Corporal Peter Welsh of the Irish Brigade embodied many “great virtues” and in a long letter to his wife explained some of the “great principles” at stake in the war. “This is my country as much as the man that was born on the soil and so it is with every man who comes to this country and becomes a citizen.” Even a war filled with “errors and mismanagement” carried a “vital interest” for “people of all nations.” Anticipating Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, Welsh defined the stakes: “This is the first test of a

modern free government in the act of sustaining itself against internal enemys and matured rebellion all men who love free government and equal laws are watching this crisis to see if a republic can sustain itself in such a case if it fails then the hopes of millions fall and the desighns and wishes of all tyrants will suceed the old cry will be sent forth from the aristocrats of europe that such is the common end of all republics the blatent croakers of the devine right of kings will shout forth their joy it becomes the duty of every one no matter what his position to do all in his power to sustain for the present and to perpetuate for the benefit [of] future generations a government . . . which is superior to any the world has yet known.” Like many of his comrades, Welsh stood ready to pay a price for his patriotism. The bill came due on May 12, 1864, when Peter Welsh was mortally wounded at the battle of Spotsylvania Courthouse. Today, his words remain timely and perceptive, ideas and sentiments that show how history, including the saddest moments in history, can touch our minds and hearts. We probably do not grow wiser and we continue to have many occasions for sadness, but like Peter Welsh, we cannot entirely give up on the idea that with God’s grace somehow our human strengths can occasionally triumph over our human weaknesses.