



Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph Over Adversity, 1822-1865

Brooks D. Simpson

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Washington, Lincoln, Grant--these were once the triumvirate of American nationalism. But, like his tomb on the Hudson, Grant's reputation has fallen into disrepair. The image many Americans hold of him is a caricature: someone "uniquely stupid," an insensitive butcher as a general, an incompetent mediocrity as president, and a drunk. Several efforts to counter this stereotype have often gone too far in the other direction, resulting in an equally distorted laudatory portrait of near-perfection. In reading the original sources, Brooks D. Simpson became convinced that Grant was neither a bumbling idiot who was the darling of fortune nor a flawless general who could do no wrong. Rather, he was a tangle of opposing qualities--a relentless warrior but a generous victor, a commander who drew upon uncommon common sense in drafting campaign plans and in winning battles, a soldier so sensitive to suffering that he could not stand to see the bloody hides at his father's tannery, a man who made mistakes and sometimes learned from them. Even as he waged war, he realized the broader political implications of the struggle; he came to believe that the preservation of the Union depended upon the destruction of slavery. Equally compelling is Grant's personal story--one of a man who struggled against great odds, bad luck, and personal humiliation, who sought joy and love in the arms of his wife and his children, and who was determined to overcome adversity and prevail over his detractors. "None of our public men have a story so strange as this," Owen Wister once observed; agreeing, William T. Sherman remarked that Grant remained a mystery even to himself. In the first of two volumes, Brooks Simpson brings Grant's story to life in an account that is readable, balanced, compelling, and definitive.

Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph Over Adversity, 1822-1865 Details

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From Reader Review Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph Over Adversity, 1822-1865 for online ebook

Christopher says

An insightful, detailed, and well written account of one of the most enigmatic figures in 19th century America. The book provides a rich description of the battles and campaigns Grant served in or led, but never let's purely military matters detract what is essentially a human story.

Marilyn Jess says

Masterful biography of US Grant, arguably, along with Abraham Lincoln, the best known American of the 19th century. Grant was certainly the hero of the American Civil War, as far as the world was concerned. There are two aspects of his generalship, up to 1865, which this book covers, that I will comment upon.

Author and historian Brooks D. Simpson writes as clearly as Grant does (have read Grant's best selling memoirs so I know this), and explains two periods of the Civil War I had never understood well until I read this book.

First, the 1864 Overland Campaign. Brought East to defeat Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, and promoted to Lt. General, Grant had much to overcome in order to accomplish his task. Fraught with challenges, the Army of the Potomac failed, time and again, to get the better of Lee. Grant had to navigate politics, less than talented officers, and being newly in command, and he did this in just over a year, until the war ended in April 1865. It was a difficult balancing act, and Simpson explains all of this in a way I understood easily, and so will you.

Second, Grant's pursuit of Lee in March-April, 1865. Appomattox, and surrender, was not a forgone conclusion at first, and the weeks' long pursuit is explained in a way which is clear, and complex at the same time. A short afterward at the end of the book includes Grant's activities after the surrender, for a few months into the new administration, and an analysis of why Grant succeeded as a Civil War commander. Much appreciated.

Simpson is working on part two of Grant's biography, the period after 1865 until his death. I can't wait to read it. Enjoy part one, and learn about the real Grant, flaws and all. A truly remarkable story of American ingenuity, persistence and success. Highly Recommended.

Donny Casey says

"Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph over Adversity 1822-1865" lets the reader experience the Civil war through the eye of one of America's greatest leaders. This biography is the first of two in the set, and covers Grant's life up until his presidency. The novel is writing in a way that engages the reader from the very beginning and in a way that seems like fiction rather than non fiction. Since the novel is written in this way I often found it hard to put the book down. The first thing you'll notice if you pick this book up though is the length—topping out at about 530 pages. This might turn some readers away, but the length is a direct result of the incredible detail this book provides. Ulysses S. Grant life before and during the Civil war makes you

understand the harsh reality of killing one's own countrymen. Now we all know that Ulysses S. Grant became very successful because of the war, but the book tries very hard to not glamorize war—presenting the facts as they truly are. This book is a great read for anyone interested in the fascinating life of the 18th president of the United States of America.

Nolan says

So what do you think you know about President Grant? Let me guess: Because your history teacher said so way back in the day, you're pretty sure he was a total slosh drunk. Who somehow drunkenly fumbled and stumbled his way to civil war success. No one says these days that Grant was a complete abstainer where alcohol is concerned, but more and more 21st-century civil war scholars are becoming convinced that many of the stories in which Grant is characterized as a complete booze hound significantly exaggerated the issue. Although some biographies repeat a story told by a newspaper reporter about a drunken trip Grant allegedly took on a steamer, current scholarship tends to debunk that story entirely. So if you thought you could pass this one up because you just don't want to read about some nasty old drunk who succeeded in spite of himself, it's time to rethink.

I very much enjoyed the writing style of this biography. Granted, toward the end, it bogs down a bit in terms of Grant's military movements, but it would be tough to write a comprehensive biography and not cover those, so it's forgivable. Otherwise, this is highly engaging, and it's a read that will hold your interest.

One of the things that impressed me most about this biography is that it stressed Grant's hatred for war. He wasn't the type to run from a battle or make excuses when he failed, but he despised war, and he had no problem telling anyone about his concern for needless bloodshed and carnage. Isn't it ironic how some of this nation's best and finest warriors have been men of peace. Eisenhower is documented as someone who hated war but who knew how to stay in the thick of things as necessary.

Grant grew up in an unusual family dynamic. He had a braggart for a father and a mother who was so taciturn as to leave him in doubt as to her affection for him. The need for that affection from a female came in the form of Julia Dent of Missouri. Her slave-owning dad wanted her to have nothing to do with Grant, but, showing the persistence for which he would ultimately become internationally famous, he dug in as if he were under siege and fought valiantly until her father agreed to the marriage.

This is the story of a kid from Ohio and Illinois who loved horses. He could more easily break a horse with his gentle manner than any one might expect. That love of horses would stand him well as he would eventually lead union forces to victory in the spring of 1865. You'll read about the West Point appointee who was in every way undistinguished. He wasn't at the bottom of his class, but nor was he at the top. He had a slouch, and he was in the habit of wearing casual sometimes badly rumpled and soiled clothes. That nondescript persona meant he could enter rooms without notice and quietly glean information that would be valuable to him. He was never without his pipe in the early days or his cigar as the war drew to its close. Mathematics came easily to Grant, and it may have been that arithmetic mind of his that assisted him in concocting battle plans that were sometimes somewhat unconventional and most often successful.

You'll read here about Grant's friendship with Lincoln and his wife, Julia's unflagging enmity toward Mrs. Lincoln. Indeed, it was Julia's dislike for Mary Lincoln that kept Grant out of Ford's theater the night Lincoln was killed—likely saving Grant's life.

The scenes depicted at the surrender of confederate forces in Virginia in April of 1865 are memorable and poignant. Both Grant and Lee come out nicely here, and it is Grant's disapproval of pomp and ceremony that

resulted in a very low-key surrender of confederate forces. Grant instructed his own men to avoid cheering as the surrender took place, reminding them that once again, these hungry tired southerners were their countrymen. As a result, U.S. forces were relatively subdued out of respect for their commander if nothing else.

In short, you don't need to be obsessed with the civil war to enjoy this book. In fact, a casual interest in it is enough to get you started, and the author's talent will keep you reading.

Delafieldlib says

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Dergrossest says

A great character study of a man who was never the best or brightest in his class or truly successful in any endeavor in which he engaged until presented with the greatest challenge of his life, one at which all of his supposed betters had proven themselves abject failures, and brilliantly did what no one else had been able to do: use the great might of the Union to mercilessly crush the Southern rebellion once and for all. I came away with much more respect for Grant. Recommended. (Note that this book does not cover Grant's much less illustrious political career).

Donna Davis says

Everyone needs heroes, and Grant has long been one of mine. This outstanding biography by Brooks D. Simpson is engrossing, and Simpson's storytelling is well documented. I read several books at a go, but I found myself turning to this one oftener than my others. It is well organized and provides a balanced, meticulously researched look at Grant's life through the end of the American Civil War. (Another volume that will deal with his presidency through the end of his life is planned, and I look forward to it also.) Thank you, thank you to Edelweiss Books, Above The Treeline, and Zenith Press for the ARC. I rated this book 4.5 stars and rounded it up.

Generally, I have a bias toward autobiographies and memoirs, because in most cases, the person can tell their own story in their own voice much better than some outside person. Exceptions are those who would over-inflate their own glory, sometimes unnecessarily (think Patton); really bad guys, like Goebbels; dead folks who went without writing a memoir, also like Goebbels; and a fourth group that I hadn't even considered till I read this biography: people who are so modest that they understate their own achievements. Grant was just such a modest man, and he only wrote his autobiography because he was dying and in debt, and was told that the book would provide enough income to keep his wife Julia housed, fed, and reasonably happy until she followed him in death. He passed over many opportunities to point out his own remarkable qualities because his nature was unpretentious and unassuming, and so those of us who love history and biographies can't ask for much better than what Simpson has offered here.

My second-favorite general (the first being Sherman) was born Hiram Ulysses Grant. The regional accent made his first name into a single syllable that sounded like "harm". His father Jesse was overcome with pride in his young son, who could ride standing up on the back of a horse by the time he was five years old. "My

Ulysses" was bragged about constantly, to where people grew tired of hearing about it. In later years, his horsemanship would stand him in good stead, both in the war with Mexico and the American Civil War. If the reader considers that a horse back then was militarily a lot like a jeep of today, but animate and so more subject to performance based on its treatment by the rider, this takes on greater importance still.

Simpson characterizes Grant's father Jesse as a braggart and windbag, but I could not help thinking that all children ought to have at least one parent who is so absolutely convinced they will grow up to do marvelous things.

Some parents who dream big and dream early about their offspring are deflated when the child reaches the age of majority without turning rocks into bread or parting the nearest sea to walk through it. So it was with Jesse Grant. His son didn't do well at farming or in business, and Jesse made it clear to his son that he hadn't lived up to expectations. At least, not yet. Although it meant having to go hat in hand to an old friend with whom he had quarreled, Jesse asked that his son be given one of his state's positions as a student at West Point. It wasn't about being in the military; it was about getting a college education free. And it was there that "Sam" Grant (nicknamed by Sherman, who was an upperclassman when Grant arrived) found the key to his future. Grant excelled at mathematics, and had war not come, he would most likely have followed through on his ambition to become a professor of mathematics. Fate crossed his path, and between the events that unfolded and Grant's superior qualities, his life impacted the world in ways that are impossible to measure.

Simpson fills in all sorts of gaps in my own knowledge of Grant. He speaks frankly about Grant and alcohol, and sets the record as clear as it is likely to get given the time elapsed. He talks about his leadership qualities, and also points out what he sees as the errors in judgment Grant made (although I occasionally quibbled with him, as if he were in a chair across the room and could hear me; seemed to me in some cases, Grant could have been criticized no matter which way he went.) But our writer champions Grant's greatest qualities, among which were his absolutely even temperament, and the fact that he never became frightened or agitated during battle, as well as his unstoppable determination and work ethic. He was a man of high principles, and he also knew how to back off from a power struggle even when he carried the authority to smack someone down. Humanity could use a few more folks like that.

Grant was unafraid to promote the use of Black soldiers, and pushed to include them even when the generals he commanded weren't all that happy about doing so. He treated them with more decency and dignity, perhaps, than any other general (all of whom were Caucasian). He refused to participate in prisoner-of-war exchanges with the Confederates for as long as they killed or mistreated Black soldiers rather than regarding them as military prisoners. That's integrity.

Most of all, the writer demonstrates that the greatest historical criticism of Grant's generalship, that he used men up needlessly and was heedless of lives lost, is unfair and incorrect. In fact, had the Union had fewer generals like McClellan and more like Grant earlier in the war, it might have been done and over a whole lot sooner.

I flagged a lot of quotes and have not included all of my notes in this review, but common sense dictates that I end this here. By now surely you can see that if the American Civil War and General Ulysses S. Grant are topics that interest you—or that might do so—then this approachable yet scholarly volume is surely worth your time and money.

Jerome says

A readable and well-researched if narrowly focused and workmanlike biography of Grant, Simpson captures Grant's complexity, and how Grant came from a store clerk in 1861 to lieutenant general and commander of the Union army. Although Grant comes off as dutiful to the point of passionless boredom in many works, Simpson fleshes out the many human sides to Grant, such as his relentless tenacity. Obviously, the bulk of the book deals with Grant's military career, and Simpson has an easy command of the subject matter, and he carefully puts Grant's wartime activity into the proper context, explaining both Grant's mastery and how he rose to his position through a combination of chance and his own tenacity.

Simpson argues that Grant's generalship played a bigger role in his victories than his numerical superiority. He also argues that the allegations about Grant's drinking can easily be exaggerated, and were; Grant did have a serious drinking problem, but he battled hard to overcome it, and was never drunk at any critical moments. Given that Grant was ashamed of this problem (drinking was viewed as a moral weakness rather than a sickness at the time), he struggled fiercely to overcome it. Simpson also ably explores such other issues as his attitudes toward slavery and his deftness at navigating the army's politics. Simpson clearly shows Grant's strong character and masterful leadership skills, as well as his low-key personality, his ambition, his dishonesty about his own mistakes, and his sometimes poor judgment of others' character.

Still, Simpson has a tendency to lionize Grant, and many of his arguments in Grant's defense seem too broad or too general. At one point Simpson claims that Grant fully supported Lincoln's racial policies, then ignores the fact there is little evidence regarding Grant's opinion on slavery during his early life. He also neglects to mention Grant's own regrets over the Cold Harbor fiasco. And at one point Simpson writes that Grant had no command experience at the beginning of the Civil War, even though he exercised command in the Mexican War with distinction. Oddly, Simpson writes that in Mexico "Grant's efforts to gain reassignment to a combat unit failed," even though he was assigned to the 4th Infantry Regiment. And curiously, Simpson sometimes refers to people by their first name.

A nuanced and smoothly written read that fully captures Grant's strengths and weaknesses, even if the narrative is short on insight and somewhat lifeless, especially when it comes to the war's battles.

Greynomad says

It was a long read but worth it. If it wasn't family, father, it was the personalities of the generals that he had to contend with.....most men would have packed it in but there was something in his soul that had the strength to continue.

I need to follow up with a book on his time as president which by all accounts was a bloody nightmare

Joseph says

If you are looking for one Grant biography to put on your shelves, make it this one. Simpson tells Grant's story in a lucid, meaningful way. I actually think I may reread this over the summer. Well written and thoroughly approachable.

Steve says

<http://bestpresidentialbios.com/2014/...>

Brooks Simpson's "Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph Over Adversity, 1822-1865" was published in 2000 and is the first of two expected volumes on Grant's life. Simpson is a historian and professor at Arizona State University. He has written a half-dozen books and is a noted authority on the Civil War and Reconstruction.

Because a second volume is (or at least once was) anticipated, this book does not cover Grant's presidency or the drafting of his memoirs in the last weeks of his life. But neither does Simpson spend much time on Grant's formative childhood or early life. The majority of the book is focused on his nearly two-decade long military career (almost 80% it to just his service in the Civil War).

Unlike earlier Grant biographer William McFeely, Professor Simpson is favorably disposed toward his subject. Fortunately his fondness never seems far out of balance. On the contrary, Simpson's analysis seems remarkably balanced and rarely does he fail to take Grant to task for his strategic blunders or personal failings.

After seeming to rush through Grant's early years Simpson's narrative comes alive with the onset of the Civil War. The biography is at its best while exploring the complex web of military and social politics Grant was forced to navigate during the war. Here Simpson offers a compelling study of Grant's often skillful management of his superiors, other senior military leaders and his troops.

But beyond exploring Grant's interactions with military and political leaders and his management of troops in the field, this biography is a well researched study of Grant's response to his own personal setbacks and failures. This is essentially an analysis of how Grant rose from relative obscurity (and, often, abysmal failure) to become the Union's greatest military general.

Two sections of the book are particularly strong. The chapters covering Grant's move to the Eastern Theater are riveting (though probably more detailed than some readers will appreciate). The description of Grant's pursuit of Lee across Virginia to the Confederate surrender at Appomattox is particularly fascinating. But Simpson's last chapter, summarizing the forces behind Grant's rise from failed farmer and shopkeeper to military hero, may be the most compelling.

But while the book is quite well written and academically rigorous, little of its content will seem new to readers familiar with Grant or the Civil War. Ignoring differences in interpretation, I recall seeing little in Simpson's narrative that I had not previously read. While this is disappointing to someone reading multiple biographies of Grant, it is of less concern to someone choosing this book as their "one" Grant biography to read.

Because the bulk of this book is focused on Grant's actions during the Civil War it is not surprising that Simpson's descriptions of the various military campaigns involving Grant are highly detailed. Unfortunately, while Simpson is an expert historian he is not always a natural storyteller and the narrative surrounding most of the battles is relatively sterile and antiseptic. Battles described by Simpson almost seem to be in black and white while the same scenes captured by Grant biographer Geoffrey Perret are far more colorful and vivid.

Also lacking is a consistent effort by Simpson to provide historical context. The biography is narrowly focused on Grant and his immediate surroundings, including whichever friends, family, advisors and others happen to be interacting with him at a given moment. Consequently there is relatively little acknowledgment of the national or global political scene – or even of great battles taking place away from Grant. For readers with a strong history background this is not an issue but for others it is like watching Grant through a very

narrow lens.

Overall, Simpson's analysis of Grant's life from birth through the end of the Civil War is a valuable if not entirely unique study. Rather than uncovering significant new material, Simpson re-interprets old information from a slightly different perspective. While his explanation for Grant's rise to military greatness is compelling, the second volume in this series has never appeared. Absent Simpson's explanation for General Grant's subsequent failure as president, the first volume alone cannot replace a cradle-to-grave biography of Grant for readers seeking a broad understanding of his entire life.

Overall rating: 3¾ stars
