



The Army of the Potomac, 3 Vols

Bruce Catton

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Mr. Lincoln's Army/Glory Road/A Stillness at Appomattox

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From Reader Review The Army of the Potomac, 3 Vols for online ebook

Matt says

This isn't anything like Shelby Foote's trilogy. Let's start with that.

When you're a respected scholar of the Civil War, and you write a trilogy on that subject, there are going to be comparisons to Foote's enormous and consistently awesome *The Civil War: A Narrative*. It's not fair, of course, but neither is my car breaking down twice in one week.

I had Foote in mind when I started Bruce Catton's *Civil War*, which is comprised of *Mr. Lincoln's Army*, *Glory Road*, and *A Stillness at Appomattox*. Right off, you see that this isn't going to be anything like Foote. That's not necessarily a bad thing. Foote's work stands alone, the absolute, Homeric epic of the American Civil War. Catton's trilogy, helpfully combined in one battered hardcover that smells like the 60s, is a different animal.

Referred to as the "Army of the Potomac trilogy," Catton's focus is far narrower than Foote. His is an Eastern-Theater-centric retelling of the Civil War, focused on the men and leaders of that much maligned Union Army. (Just as a digression, casual "fans" of the Civil War probably won't miss much with Catton's focus on the East, since the Western Theater consistently gets short-shrift.) This eventually-triumphant Army was led by the sad likes of the out-of-his-depth McClellan, the blustering Hooker (probably distracted by all the camp followers...er, hookers), the beautifully-whiskered but incompetent Burnside, the sourpuss Meade, and finally, thankfully, the indomitable Grant.

Since I found all three books in one volume, among my dad's Vietnam-era college textbooks, I decided I'd review them all together. I'm not getting paid by the review, after all.

The first book is *Mr. Lincoln's Army*. It begins in media res, as General John Pope is losing the Second Battle of Bull Run. Since the Army of the Potomac was only an observer to this trouncing, the action picks up with General George B. McClellan being returned to overall command, after the unfortunate John Pope experiment.

Overall, Catton's trilogy is lucid, witty, well-paced, and mostly-accessible to general readers. However, this opening is a bit confusing, and you might, as I did, struggle to get your bearings. Catton skips right over the start of the war, including First Bull Run. While I appreciate avoiding another a half-hearted prologue in which an author attempts to explain the origins of the Civil War (it was slavery), a little context can go a long way. You're probably 20 pages in before you figure out where the book has started. Catton also devotes almost no time to the Peninsula Campaign (Mechanicsville, Gaines Mill, the Seven Days), which is odd in a book about the Army of the Potomac.

The first book really gains steam as it nears Antietam, which Catton elevates from a pyrrhic Union victory to a central event in the Civil War (and by extension, human history). In Catton's telling, if the Union had won smashingly at Antietam, the war might have ended with reunification, though with slavery still intact. The fact that McClellan only half-won forced Lincoln to make the war into something bigger: a crusade against slavery. So followed the Emancipation Proclamation.

Glory Road and *A Stillness at Appomattox* are stronger than their predecessor. Both of them avoid the

sputtering start of *Mr. Lincoln's Army* and hew to a more conventional chronological approach. *Glory Road* takes the Army of the Potomac from one disaster to another - Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville - before its apotheosis at Gettysburg. *A Stillness at Appomattox* follows Grant's Wilderness Campaign through the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, Cold Harbor, Petersburg, Five Forks and victory.

The overall theme of the three books is that the Army of the Potomac always had good men, and that in general, its victories were won despite its leadership, rather than because of them. In supporting this view, Catton does a fascinating job illuminating the life of a Civil War soldier. Beyond the typical diaries, journals, and writings of the actual soldiers, Catton inserts digressions about food, clothing, and shelter that answer all the questions you had about soldiering but were afraid to ask.

Catton's writing style is certainly interesting. It's a mixture of narrative driven story telling and analysis. At times, Catton employs a sly, mordant wit; at other times, he launches into this grandiloquent, purplish prose. (There are moments when he out purple-proses Master Foote).

I appreciated a lot of things about this trilogy. First, it was focused. While the Eastern Theater already has enough press (it's time for the Western Theater to get some love), I appreciated being able to follow one army in detail (God love Shelby Foote, but slogging through his descriptions of the side-show along the Red River tried my patience).

I also liked the Union-centric point-of-view. There is an old saying that history is written by the winners; in the case of the Civil War, just the opposite is true.

The history of the American Civil War has been shaped, packaged, and sold by Southern writers and historians, aided and abetted by their credulous Northern brethren. Because of this insidious historical whitewash, we have such legends as "the beloved" Lee (Michael Schaar's description) and the "Lost Cause." No one seems to recognize that this is moral equivalence at its foulest (I don't hear anyone talking about "the beloved" Rommel).

This trilogy spares us the Southern mythologizing of Foote and others. It was wonderful to read a history of the Civil War without the author panting over the genius of Stonewall Jackson, tearing up at the mention of Robert E. Lee, and acting like a 12 year-old boy with his first BB gun when describing Nathan Bedford Forrest. You learn very little of these men, which is fine, because you can learn all you want and more from a billion other books/hagiographies. (The most important thing you can learn, which is always diminished, is that they fought to keep their fellow human beings enslaved.)

Unfortunately, the myth of the Lost Cause is insidious, and Catton is not totally immune. He still refers to abolitionists as "narrow minded" and calls them radicals, just as their enemies did, proving the power of nomenclature. Maybe I'm being myopic, but when it comes to the issue of slavery, being *against* slavery actually seems, you know, enlightened. And further, when it comes down to human bondage, there isn't much wiggle room. You're either for it or against it, and if you're against it, that doesn't make you a radical: it makes you something less than evil, which is where the other side stand. But I'm just ranting at this point.

The highlight of the book, and the reason I'd recommend it, is the character sketches of the leaders of the Army of the Potomac. This is the first time that men such as Burnside, Hooker and Meade actually came to life. In the space of a few pages, or even paragraphs, Catton gets to the essence of these generals. He realizes, like few other historians, that decisions are not made in a vacuum, but are made within a horribly complicated, intricate context. And so you get Joe Hooker, nominally a brave soldier, coming unglued at Chancellorsville. And there's Ambrose Burnside, who has his plans for an attack at Petersburg changed; in

response, he refuses to choose a new lead brigade, and instead leaves the decision to the equivalent of a coin toss. And you get Grant, the ultimate victor. He is not a butcher, but a man who possessed what the others lacked: that hard, unbending will to keep pounding away when all human instinct says stop.

In other words, Catton seems to understand how hard it is to be a general. Many historians find it easy to criticize Meade, for instance, for not pursuing Lee after Gettysburg. But Meade is human; his Army had just survived the three most important, fraught days in American history; he had imperfect intelligence. Heck, I can barely decide what frozen meal to eat for dinner. I can't even imagine the types of decisions these guys had to make, decisions with bigger consequences than the inevitable stomach ache I'll get from the frozen shrimp pasta.

The mercurial McClellan is the most interesting. In all other histories, he is incredibly frustrating. His ability to build, train and inspire an army were unmatched, but his ability to use that army didn't exist. I've never seen an explanation as simple or as good as Catton's: McClellan was just too young and immature for that kind of responsibility.

He was trusted to the point of death by one hundred thousand fighting men, but he himself always had his lurking doubts. The soldiers firmly believed that where he was everything was bound to be all right. They would gladly awaken from the deepest sleep of exhaustion to go and cheer him because they felt that way...But it seems that McClellan himself was never quite convinced. An uncertainty tormented him. It was almost as if some invisible rider constantly followed him, and came up abreast every now and then to whisper: "But General, are you sure?" Every man tries to live up to his own picture of himself. McClellan's picture was glorious, but one gathers that he was never quite confident that he could make it come to life. Perhaps this was partly because too much happened to him too soon...Fame came early, and it came like an explosion, touched off before he had had a chance to get set for it. He had found himself at the top of the ladder almost before he started to climb, and the heights were dizzying. One day he was leading a diminutive army of volunteers in an obscure campaign far back in the wild mountains; the next day - almost literally, the next day - he was the savior of his country...He was thirty-five when the war started.

My only real criticism of the trilogy comes from the disorienting beginning to *Mr. Lincoln's Army*, where the narrative jumps back and forth in time before the reader even knows where he's started.

If we want to get nit-picky (and we might as well, I suppose), I was disappointed with the lack of maps, which made the descriptions of the battles almost pointless. Catton goes into great depth in describing the movements of the Army of the Potomac. And we're not just talking about corps or divisions, but the placement of particular regiments. Without detailed maps, these descriptions are just meaningless words. (For instance, at Gettysburg, it's quite hard to keep Seminary Ridge and Cemetery Ridge distinct in your mind; indeed, the Union Generals even failed to do so). Accordingly, some parts of this book are best read while sitting next to a computer with internet access.

These are minor problems. On the whole, I really enjoyed the trilogy, and found it odd that I'd gone this far in life without reading anything by Bruce Catton.

The lesson: never underestimate your dad's small collection of undergraduate history books from the 1960s.

Erik Graff says

I read Catton's Centennial History of the Civil War (1961-65) much before getting around to his Army of the Potomac (1951-53) trilogy, thinking that the latter might be too focused to be as interesting. I was wrong, but it was beneficial to read the latter work before the former in order to have the background.

This book is almost as much about the struggles of Abraham Lincoln with his generals, particularly George B. McClellan--a struggle reflected as well in electoral politics, as it is about the actual formation and campaigns of the Army of the Potomac.

As ever, Catton writes well and movingly.

John Nelson says

This book contains three of Bruce Catton's books in a single volume: Mr. Lincoln's Army, Glory Road, and A Stillness at Appomattox, the last of which won Catton a Pulitzer Prize. Although the volume's title indicates that it is a history of the entire Civil War, the three books it includes actually cover only one front - the decisive eastern front between Washington D.C. and Richmond - and are tightly focused on the northern army. A complete history of the war would have required the author to cover many other topics, including but not limited to action on other fronts, the North's naval blockade of the South, political maneuvering in the two capitols, and diplomatic maneuvering in Europe. While this volume cannot be considered a complete history of the war, though, it does provide an interesting, informative, and very detailed look at North's Army of the Potomac,

Marianne says

RA to Non-fic

Chris Wolfington says

Not a military history, with in-depth descriptions and analysis of campaigns. There are general campaign outlines and anecdotes of the generals, but that's it. The real strength is how he tells about the battles from the soldiers' points of view. You can see the battlefields in your head...the sweeping landscapes, the smoke and crack of the muskets...pretty good stuff as far as "action scenes" go.

James P. Klag says

This is my second re-read of the trilogy which made up the first three volumes in my library. Mom bought the book club editions for me back in the early '60s. Bruce Catton was the finest story-teller among Civil

War historians. While he always seemed to put the story first, his scholarship was excellent and his books have stood the test of time. The Army Of The Potomac trilogy is necessarily written from the Union viewpoint but Catton more than does justice to those who fought for the South, unlike Freeman's "Lee's Lieutenants" about the Army Of Northern Virginia which barely even mentions USA forces except as the unfortunate victims of R. E. Lee's brilliance. Anyone interested in the Civil War who hasn't read Catton's trilogy should do so and see what great story telling is like. Wherever your sympathies lie with respect to the war, you will get real enjoyment from Catton's brilliant writing.

Pat says

The first volume of the three part series...."Mr. Lincoln's Army."

Robert says

This is an excellent series for someone who is just beginning to develop an interest in the Civil War. It lacks the detail and complexity of Shelby Foote's history or even Bruce Catton's second trilogy. But it is well-written and provides a wealth of information about the important military leaders and their battles in Virginia.

Nathan says

Catton is a very skilled writer. The pages turn themselves. If movies were made into book, this would be the book. Entertaining, vivid, and shallow. Alas.

One fears that at times Mr. Catton took too many liberties in his descriptions of people and events. Lightly footnoted, which makes it hard to tell when he's drawing on sources and when he's drawing on his imagination.

Four stars for a skill at telling the big picture with just enough fine detail to make it all come to startling life. A great generalist's history.

Steven Peterson says

This is the final volume in a trilogy on the Army of the Potomac. Bruce Catton writes superbly; this book reads very well. The book begins with a harebrained scheme advanced by, among others, General Judson Kilpatrick (often called Kill Cavalry for his willingness to engage in dangerous actions), to have cavalry raid Richmond. And the book ends with General Ulysses Grant riding off to meet General Robert E. Lee for the surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia.

The book proceeds through Grant's campaign, from the Wilderness to Petersburg to Appomattox Court House. Characters come to life under Catton's writing.

Even though this book is over fifty years old, it still reads well and has held up nicely with time.

Omar Ali says

Read these a long time ago, just got reminded of them today somehow. Great writing. I am sure new research and new perspectives have appeared since then, so some of the information may be dated. But most of what I know of the civil war, I learned from these books.

Michelle says

An excellent introduction to the history of the Army of the Potomac which includes lots of interesting background, particularly of the politics involved. Catton uses the words of the soldiers themselves to tell the story in this very engaging and informative read

Jeff says

Bruce Catton's *Civil War* is not as sweeping as one would expect from the title. In fact, in this three-volume set (*Mr. Lincoln's Army*, *Glory Road*, and *A Stillness at Appomattox*), Mr. Catton focuses his energy specifically on the Army of the Potomac. Anyone who has read my other Catton reviews can probably predict what I will say next: in a word, brilliant. I have yet to find an author who is so adept at teaching me things I did not know about the Civil War, nor have I found anyone who has had such a profound impact on the way that I see the war as a whole and as a series of individual episodes and storylines. And so, I will say it again (and again and again), if you haven't read Bruce Catton, you have an incomplete view of the American Civil War.

In this particular case, I feel it necessary to review the component parts of this book, rather than waiting until the end, so...

Mr. Lincoln's Army

The title, *Mr. Lincoln's Army* is somewhat of a misnomer at first, because, as Mr Catton reminds us, the Army of the Potomac after the end of First Bull Run and through Antietam and its aftermath was wholly George B. McClellan's Army; in fact, Lincoln referred to it as McClellan's Bodyguard. But the Army eventually becomes Mr. Lincoln's due in large part to the actions — and inactions — of McClellan, especially in the days surrounding the battle of Antietam.

And Antietam is at the core of this volume. Antietam, where McClellan squandered chance after chance provided by the very gods in the form of the Lost Order. Antietam, where McClellan had an army capable of overwhelming the Army of Northern Virginia if only he had the wisdom to recognize the true odds facing him and the courage to roll the dice to crush Lee and very possibly end the war in 1862 on terms that would have most pleased McClellan (by not involving abolition). Antietam, the imperfect victory that allowed Lincoln to proclaim imperfect emancipation, an action that served just enough to keep Great Britain and France out of the war.

Mind you, this is not light reading. Mr. Catton is expansive in his description of the battle of Antietam in a way that even books specifically about the battle have not dared, so if you are not one for the detail of battle, be forewarned. Also note that this is not a straight chronological outline of the first years of the war; rather, we revisit the Peninsula Campaign and Second Bull Run as a means of understanding where McClellan (and his subordinates), Lincoln (and his subordinates), and the Army of the Potomac all stood in relation to one another in the waning days of September 1862. But it is all to a good end, because every word leads us to understanding the transition from McClellan's glorious army to the one that Lincoln and Grant used to end the war.

Glory Road

Mr. Catton continues his story of the Army of the Potomac in *Glory Road* with the dismissal of McClellan from command of the army. He continues through the disaster at Fredricksburg (due to Burnside's incompetence for command at that level) through the disaster of Chancellorsville (due to Hooker's loss of nerve at crucial moments) through the triumph at Gettysburg under Meade.

This volume is, again, very detailed in its descriptions of battles in ways that no other author I've run across dares to attempt. Thanks to Mr. Catton, I now have a more thorough understanding of how and why Fredricksburg was so foolishly disastrous. And he has answered one of the longest standing questions in my mind: what made Sickles decide it was a good idea to abandon the line of Cemetery Hill at Gettysburg and expose his troops so in the Peach Orchard? (Answer: it had a lot to do with trying to not repeat the mistakes he had made at Chancellorsville.) Mr. Catton also sheds a great deal of light on how very close the North came to defeat at Gettysburg and the role that the maturation of the Army of the Potomac played in saving the day. He also confirms my long-standing supposition that Meade's greatest asset at Gettysburg was that he avoided mistakes, but that Meade was not the general the Army needed to win the war in the East.

These stories are told completely from the point of view of the Army of the Potomac. That's true of *Mr. Lincoln's Army* as well, but that viewpoint becomes more crystallized in *Glory Road*. We know very little of what Lee is thinking or planning beyond what we absolutely need to advance the story. Nor do we have any real knowledge of the events in other theaters of the war. We are with the Army of the Potomac and, for the most part, we only know what the Army sees and knows, which provides a very distinctive understanding of the chain of events that led us from McClellan's dismissal to the dedication of the cemetery at Gettysburg.

One thing is for certain. My next visit to Gettysburg will be very different from all of the others and I will make it a point to visit those places where the actions of a few brave men saved an entire army and possibly put the North into a position where it would ultimately win the war.

A Stillness at Appomattox

In this volume, we follow the Army of the Potomac — now under Grant's ultimate command — through the Wilderness to its hard-fought victory in the trenches of Petersburg and on to its ultimate victory over the Army of Northern Virginia at Appomattox.

Wow!

So many other authors have told me about the way in which Grant's strategies changed the nature of the Civil War and, in fact, warfare in general. Mr. Catton took me on a step-by-step journey that shed new light on how a very mobile war turned into a precursor of World War I and on how the Army of the Potomac was transformed into a fierce and determined fighting force never seen before on the North American continent.

Mr. Catton also continues to fill in gaps along the way about such matters as the integration of black troops into the Army and the effect of draftees and bounty men on the performance of the troops. He takes us on a side trip to the Shenandoah Valley so that we can understand the importance of Sheridan's victories on the ability of the Army of Northern Virginia to continue the fight. He provides an amazing description of the lead-up to and execution of the mining of Confederate lines that resulted in the disastrous Battle of the Crater. And he takes us on the ultimate race south and west along the Appomattox... a race that restored one last time the war of mobility and one that ended with one last Rebel Yell.

In the end, I found myself regretting that the history lesson had to come to a close. For the first time in my life, I wished that a book could go on and on. Now that I'm done, I'll miss it as one misses a dear friend. And I recommend these three volumes for anyone who wants to go on an amazing journey with the Army of the Potomac.

Bob Young says

I read these three books about 30 years ago and they set the hook as far as my interest in the Civil War goes...great stories told told surpassingly well...truly enjoyable...

Mark Neuer says

Almost 300 pages left. yeah This book is very informative on the Army of the Pottomic and how the Lincoln administration nearly destroyed it by manhandling it. The 1860's was a time of deceit and corruption. Everybody was trying to get rich on the back of this unlucky army and the policies of the political powers of the day. Lincoln was constantly being played for the patsy by his cabinet. If they weren't trying to defame him, they were trying to get his job or suck in so much power that would make a black hole jealous. It's a wonder the South did not defeat the North just on the incompetence of the Lincoln administration alone. The author does a very good job telling this armies story. I do like his narrative style. It moistens the reading to a delectable entree. Where I do feel the author falls a little short is getting to the point. He uses so many words to get his point across the point gets lost in the word. I tended to read passages over and over to find the full meaning. It's a well written book and if your a Civil War nut like myself it should be in your library. If your looking for a series on the civil war, all inclusive, this is not the book for you. I would recommend Shelby Foote's masterwork trilogy, The Civil War: A Narrative. This is a book on how an army overcomes the trials and tribulations of a very difficult time in our history.
