



Elihu Washburne : The Diary and Letters of America's Minister to France During the Siege and Commune of Paris

Michael Hill , David McCullough (Foreword)

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The remarkable and inspiring story--told largely in his own words--of American diplomat Elihu Washburne, who heroically aided his countrymen and other nationals when Paris was devastated by war and revolution in 1870-1871. A former Congressman and friend of Presidents Lincoln and Grant, Elihu Washburne was appointed U.S. Minister to France just before the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war. Alone among major-power foreign diplomats, Washburne remained in Paris throughout a siege by Prussian forces. As Parisians starved and shivered through the winter, Washburne aided Americans and other nationals with food and fuel. When the siege ended, the government fell to radicals who instituted a brutal new regime, the Commune, slaughtering innocent people, among them the Catholic archbishop. Once again Washburne helped wherever he could, earning commendation not only from his own government but from the Prussians and French as well.

Washburne's letters and diaries from the time vividly describe the horrors he witnessed. Accompanied by Michael Hill's invaluable commentary, they form the best firsthand account we have of these terrible events. They also quietly inspire us with the example of what one person can do in the worst circumstances to aid those in need and earn admiration for himself and his country.

Elihu Washburne : The Diary and Letters of America's Minister to France During the Siege and Commune of Paris Details

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From Reader Review Elihu Washburne : The Diary and Letters of America's Minister to France During the Siege and Commune of Paris for online ebook

Vicki says

Well, well, well. I finally got a truly fantastic First Reads books. I almost don't compete for them anymore, because I want to like them so bad and I want to give good reviews to new and first-time authors, and the ones I've won before have just been really really ridiculously not good. But the worm has turned! This book is great.

Here's the idea: Elihu Washburne is appointed Minister to France, goes over, and gets caught up in a war, siege of Paris, and then a revolution in quick succession. He's kind of sickly (malaria, it seems), a bit melodramatic (kind of eyebrow-raising how many times he thinks things have never before been seen in the annals of human history), and not very suave (lots of shirt-sleeves, plainspokenness, etc.). Pretty much the entire diplomatic corps deserts Paris in advance of the Prussian army's arrival, but Washburne stays because he feels it's his sacred duty to the public service to remain as long as any Americans are there. And while he's there, why not work on behalf of poor Prussians rounded up and imprisoned for no reason? Why not serve as the de facto Minister for the nations that have fled, getting visas for their citizens to leave the country? Why not try to facilitate the release of the Archbishop of Paris, taken hostage by the Commune? Well, he did all of that, and more!

Washburne was famous for what he did at the time -- written up in all the papers, deemed a credit to the nation, got written proclamations from the President and the Prussian king and the Vatican and and and. When he finally died, they flew flags at half-staff in every State Dept building world-wide. That's some pretty serious stuff. But this book came about because they recently discovered that in addition to his correspondence with the Sec. of State, he kept a detailed diary and corresponded almost daily with his (huge) family, so there was *so much more* information available to tell the story than we'd previously thought. This book is upwards of 90% direct quotes from the source material, but his writing is engaging and it in no way feels like reading a million footnotes. It's a page turner, I'm telling you!

Reading about the siege from someone who lived through it, but had rations and access to outside news, was kind of jarring. In one anecdote he'd tell how much people were paying for rats at butcher shops (different price if it's long-tailed, FYI), and then he'd list the menu from the dinner party he attended. It's not like he experienced no deprivation whatsoever -- he had to send his family away and missed them terribly, and at one point he ate horsemeat cooked over an open flame -- but you couldn't get a real feel for how bad it actually was. This is not to hold that against Washburne. Reality is reality, and in reality he was not going to starve to death. And he really did take responsibility for an astonishing number of people, many of them destitute, and sent money and his own provisions when he heard that any of them were in trouble. But it was always a little discomfiting to be reading of him so sympathetically and then realize that he actually had it pretty good, relatively speaking.

Another thing I realized is that, having never lived in a war zone (thank you luck/fate/providence/spaghetti monster), I was really thrown by the descriptions of daily life. As a for instance, when the French Army retook Paris from the Commune, in an honest-to-goodness military assault on the city, Washburne reports (outraged) that two innocent Americans were pulled from the restaurant where they were eating and arrested, and he had to go get them out of jail. It's like, wait, you kept your reservation during an assault on the city?

The Commune stuff was interesting, but I feel like I don't really understand what they were hoping to accomplish. Punish the government that screwed up the war, yes; take control of the means of production, yes; but then they didn't ... produce anything. And the plan to burn all of Paris to the ground was maybe not so smart. I would have liked to have seen some numbers for the murders they carried out; Washburne thought their reign of terror was without precedent in human history (even though France had an actual Reign of Terror 80 years earlier, that I think was a slightly bigger deal, but what can I say, Elihu's kind of excitable), but there weren't a lot of facts attached to that accusation. Like, a list of crimes.

ANYWAY. This book was incredibly readable, makes you proud of a folksy American diplomat (kind of like In The Garden of Beasts in that regard), and can teach you a few things about history. If you like memoirs, biographies, or historical nonfiction, I say pick it up!

James Sorensen says

Disclaimer: I won this book as part of the Goodreads first-read program.

Author Michael Hill has done extensive research into the life of Elihu Washburne in preparation for writing this biography. Hill has chosen to focus on Washburne's life during his tenure as American Minister to France. Hill takes a close look at Washburne as he stays in Paris during both the Franco-Prussian War and the ensuing siege of Paris and then the following insurrection of the Communards(Reds)and the Reign of Terror(October 1870 to May 1971).

Elihu Washburne was a close friend of President Abraham Lincoln, and Washburne himself served eight terms in Congress. Elihu would often travel with Lincoln as they visited Civil War battle sites during the war. After Lincoln's death and at the election of Ulysses S. Grant as President Washburne served a short time as Secretary of State. Due to health concerns Washburne steps down as Secretary of State and accepts the position of Minister.

Hill explores Washburne's life through his, Washburne's, writing during his posting in France. We view the Siege and subsequent Reign of Terror 1st hand through journal entries, letters to family and correspondence with Government Leaders.

Hill has done a very good job of allowing inside the mind of Washburne as we watch the depravity of the human condition during the eight month period the book covers. This is an excellent look at a foreigner's view of the events in Paris. I would suggest that this would be useful axillary reading for classes in French History.

An excellent read for those interested in this period of History or those who enjoy reading about America's Leaders of the 1800's.

Vince says

I got this book as a Goodreads giveaway.

I knew a little bit about Washburne due to my American Civil War investigations. Then a reading of David

McCullough's 'The Greater Journey: Americans in Paris', my interest was further piqued, so I was quite excited to give this book a go.

At the time of the Civil War Washburne was an influential politician from Illinois, who was a strong supporter of Lincoln and was responsible for getting Grant a brigadier general's commission in the early days of the war. When Grant became President in 1868, Washburne was rewarded with the ambassadorship to France. Not long after his arrival relations between Prussia and France deteriorated to such an extent that war broke out between them in 1870. The war went badly for France and Paris became besieged by the Prussian Army. This was to last from mid September 1870 to the end of February 1871. Most of the foreign diplomats shut down their legations and went home, but Washburne remained, feeling that it was his duty to remain and represent any Americans until they could be gotten out safely. At the time there were a large number of German nationals working in the city and with the onset of the war and siege many of them were left stranded in this obviously hostile territory. Washburne took on the responsibility of representing them also and handled the negotiations between the French and Prussians to get those people out. With the end of the war and the lifting of the siege, one would have expected a gradual return to some normalcy, but in mid-March a revolution occurred in the city and what was to become known as the Paris Commune expelled the national government and instituted a reign of terror reminiscent of the excesses of the French Revolution days. As the Communards had little to no influence outside of Paris, the city again quickly became besieged, this time by a slowly resurgent national government and army. Again Washburne decided to remain and kept the American legation open. In many ways this period was more horrible than the earlier siege by the Prussians, as now Paris was engulfed by a civil war in which Frenchmen were killing and abusing other Frenchmen within the confines of their own capital city. At the end of May 1871 national troops broke through and the insurrection was finally put down.

Michael Hill does a fine job in editing Washburne's memoirs, diary and letters, some of which had never seen the light of day before. Washburne's writings are presented in real time, so the reader gets to follow the unfolding drama as it occurred. Washburne was an inveterate diary keeper, writing almost every day, so we get to experience the events with nary a gap. It is interesting to compare the tone of the diary entries and personal letters to family members with his official dispatches. The latter tend to be in a "just the facts ma'am" manner, while the former reveal a man whose emotions are quite evident, even to the point of occasional despondency bordering on depression. However, Washburne's sense of humor comes through from time to time as well. All in all, we get a sense of a complex human conjuring a Herculean effort to successfully deal with what must have been a horrendous ordeal. Hill occasionally intersperses some background information to give greater context to the situation as it evolves, but he never overshadows Washburne's telling of the tale. Washburne was an excellent writer, clear and succinct. One gets the feeling that Hill is a clear and succinct editor as well, since the story never flags. First person history can be a marvelous way to get a sense of period, place or event, and the presentation here is top notch. Kudos go out to Mr. Hill.

Nancy says

Several years ago I read *The Greater Journey* by David McCullough, an author well known and whose books are well reviewed. It was a very enjoyable and enlightening book, and I especially was interested in the American writers, painters, physicians and thinkers who spent time in Paris.

Then I got to the third part of the book. I was totally ignorant of the Siege of Paris when the Prussian Army led by Bismarck surrounded the city for 131 days, nor had I known of the collapse of Napoleon III, the rise

of the Third French Republic, and the government takeover by radicals called The Commune. And I had never heard of the American ambassador to France, Elihu Washburne.

After finishing *The Greater Journey* I wanted to know more about Washburne and found and ordered Hill's book. Hill is a researcher who has worked with McCullough, as well as Nathaniel Philbrick (*Mayflower*, *The Last Stand*, *The Heart of the Sea*), and Ken Burns (*Baseball*, *The Civil War*). The book uses excerpts from the diary and letters written by Washburne during the ordeal.

Washburne was born in Maine to a hard working subsistence farmer. He knew he wanted more in life and decided to study law. He went West where opportunity offered quick wealth. He and his two brothers all served in Congress at the same time. Washburne was an abolitionist who was in close contact with President Lincoln during the Civil War.

After years of Washington politics he was offered the posh spot in Paris by his old friend, the newly elected president Ulysses S. Grant. Washburne thought it would be a wonderful way to serve out his last years before retirement. He and his family, hobnobbing with the Emperor and Empress in Paris of the Second Empire, the most lush and glorious civilization in the world!

Things did not work out that way. Instead France went to war with Germany. Washburne's wife and children left Paris, except for his son Gratiot who stayed to volunteer with the American Ambulance. Often ill, lonely, and bombarded with people seeking aid, Washburne put in long days.

Washburne was one of the few foreigners who did not leave the city. He not only protected American interests, he worked to save the Germans in Paris, many arrested as hostile aliens; others lost their jobs and income. He provided food for the starving, sometimes from his own pantry. The price of a half bushel of potatoes rose to \$155 in today's dollars. The poor were reduced to eating horsemeat, dog and even rats. Washburn sent firewood to the families who were freezing in one of the coldest winters remembered.

"Oh, this horrid war...I have had enough of all this terrible business and I begin to hate Paris...It is not living [.] It is simply a wretched, fearful, almost unendurable existence." Dec. 8, 1870 letter to Adele Washburn

After the Germans won the war they entered Paris for two days of occupation, then left town. Washburne's family returned, hoping for that lovely sojourn they had dreamt of....and everything changed again.

After the death of Napoleon III, The Third French Republic allowed a few radicals to cease control of the country. The leader, Raoul Rigault, was a psychopath who wanted to resurrect the French Revolution just for the fun of it. A new Reign of Terror descended upon Paris.

"Anarchy, assassination, and massacre hold high carnival..." March 25, 1871 letter to Secretary Of State Fish in Washington, D.C.

The damage done by the Commune, the people they killed, the destruction of monuments and buildings, the arrest and murder of Catholic priests, was more horrifying than the war. Arbitrary arrests and the takeover of personal property was rampant. Anyone who dared express sympathy toward the victims was turned upon by the crowds. And killed.

Washburne was called upon by the Vatican to help save the life of Archbishop Darboy, the beloved elderly priest who stayed in Paris to help the people during the Siege. But before the fall of the commune, all the imprisoned were put to death. Including Darboy and 70 other priests.

Washburne is a forgotten hero of a forgotten war. His commitment to his job, his country, and to helping people was remarkable. When most fled the country or thought only of themselves, he risked his life and health to do his duty. He was a real American hero.

Jim Chase says

Captured largely in his own words, this is a fascinating account of Elihu Washburne — the onetime friend and confidant of Presidents Lincoln and Grant, and ambassador to France during a time of tremendous tumult and drama in the streets of 1870's Paris. I find myself marveling at how unaware we are of what is an undeniably riveting story of American honor and personal sacrifice, embodied in the valiant actions of a dutiful public servant in a hotbed of chaos, disorder, and terror. Most certainly, Mr. Washburne was one of the "better angels of our nature".

Ashlea (plotdriven.com) says

Despite a very scanty knowledge of French history, I thoroughly enjoyed this book on a noteworthy American in Paris during a difficult time. This is a good mix of exposition and excerpts from Washburne's letters and diary.

Mr. Washburne, a contemporary of Lincoln and Grant, was appointed American Minister in France. Just after he arrived in Paris, the French decided for not particularly good reasons to declare war on Prussia, who shortly thereafter besieged Paris because they were the military powerhouse of Europe at the time. Washburne decided to stick it out and assisted many Germans and Americans during the siege. Then, after surrender and just as Paris was recovering, the Commune, a poorly organized rebellious group upset over the terms of surrender, tried to overthrow the government. (I haven't caught up on everything on wikipedia but apparently this was a standard Parisian response.) This was even messier than the siege, and Washburne again put himself in peril to try to protect American interests, displaced Germans, and the arrested Archbishop of Paris.

I can definitely appreciate how the author wanted to keep Mr. Washburne from being lost in the shuffle of history. Michael Hill also shares David McCullough's skill at succinct and clear historical writing for the layman.

Disclosure: I received a copy of this book through Goodreads First Reads program.

Rob Slaven says

I received this book as part of a GoodReads drawing and despite the low-low price of 'absolutely nothing' I give my candid opinions below.

When I first sat down with this book it was with a bit of concern. Having somewhat recently taken my hand at Samuel Pepys I was expecting a similar regurgitation of the day-to-day life of our subject diplomat. I was pleasantly and quickly relieved to find that unlike previous publishers of similar material, Michael Hill has taken much greater care to craft a more robust picture of our illustrious Mr. Washburne. It is doubly helpful

that Washburne himself is an acute and entertaining writer so the two work in a wonderfully collaborative manner despite their separation in time by over a century.

The book begins with a brief overview of the players and time period involved. This is especially useful since the events depicted aren't all that familiar to American readers. After the initial setting of the stage, the text is divided into six chronological sections, each with a brief overview of the time period involved followed by Washburne's own writings. Large quotes from Washburne are bracketed and enhanced by Hill's commentary and background. This is no mere reprint of old diaries but rather the reader is walked patiently from one event to the next while our esteemed diplomat chatters away nostalgically in the background.

In summary, this offering is what first-person historical writing should be. Sources speak for themselves but with expert and erudite help to bridge the gaps between past and present. While the specificity of the subject matter may leave history novices a bit behind, Hill's "Elihu Washburne" is a perfect choice for a medium to advanced history maven.

Mmars says

How many stars? A personal rating, based on whether I "liked" it would be 3 stars. However, the value of the book increases when its value for historical purposes is considered. Larger public libraries and academic libraries should consider acquiring this little gem. Illinois high school libraries interested in native sons may find it of interest as will lay readers who enjoy primary source writing in the form of diary or letters. Also, a little background knowledge of Paris and its politics mid-1800s is helpful but not necessary.

As a lay reader, here's my review:

I selected this off the new books shelf at the library because I had struggled and failed to finish Gore Vidal's 1876 that begins with a journalist and his daughter disembarking from a ship from France to crowds of admirers in New York City in 1876. This is mostly due to his daughter's connection to French royalty through marriage. The journalist has been in France for quite a few years and his daughter has never been to America. What I wanted to find in "Elihu Washburne" was what their life had been like in France during the Franco-Prussian war. Vidal tells us nothing or very little of this.

Also, I had read about a third of McCullough's book before needing to return it the library and had hoped this would tell me more along those lines. This didn't satisfy me on either of those fronts, but I did learn a few things about the Franco-Prussian war and the tumultuous times. I agree with the reviewers that found the letters boring, I would use the word tiresome. Perhaps more mundane than one would expect from someone so impacted by and near the war. However, this is not the writing of a writer or historian. Washburne was a diplomat and this book is largely composed of his diary entries. Writings, perhaps, never intended for publication.

Kelli Lynn Dwyer says

Once I read the short paragraph telling what this book was about, I knew I had to read it. I'm so excited to

have won the giveaway and as soon as I receive the book in the mail and review it, I'll be sure to write a proper review. Thanks!

Linda Bennett says

I have loved everything David McCullough has written; however, he did not write this book, his research assistant, Michael Hill, did.

Michael Hill knows how to tell an interesting story. The book flows even though, sometimes, Hill has to go back and forth a period of months or years to complete a thought. The book is mostly about the horrendous Franco-Prussian war which led to the even more horrendous Siege of Paris and then the even more horrendous Commune of Paris. The United States Ambassador to France, Elihu Washburne, was a plain New Englander turned Midwesterner, a very nice, very wise man, who did us all proud when other countries' diplomats fled the terror. He was not unsophisticated or uneducated, but he was not from the usual old moneyed candidates for such an assignment as directed by President Ulysses S. Grant.

As a Trans World Airlines employee for 31 years, I visited Paris more times than I can remember. I know about the French Revolution and Napoleon Bonaparte. This book takes place in the 1870s with the Emperor Napoleon III and his Empress Eugenie; a period of time I knew nothing about. I had been told at the Tuilleries Gardens that a palace had once stood there but it burned down; and that's all I knew. I knew nothing about a communist take over of Paris, and their attempt to burn the entire city. Now I do.

I read this book because I do genealogy research and found that a third great grandmother, from Philadelphia, had died in Paris on Christmas Day 1871. I am trying to find out why she died so far from home. The answer was not in this book, but if she was in Paris during the Siege and the Commune, she lived through a terrible time.

Dbbooks says

This is a fascinating biography based on historical documentation of a figure basically unknown in American schools. A rarity in any era is an honest politician with mid west hard work values and dedication to the office and people it serves.

Elihu's diary entries draw you into the conflict, on scene, on the ground, and in his mind for an enjoyable read. There is a tension in the atmosphere among the French people that hints at the attitude they convey for the next 100 years.

Aurora says

Title: Elihu Washburne; The Diary and Letters of America's Minister to France During the Siege and Commune of Paris

Author: Elihu Washburne was writer, while Michael Hill and David McCullough were possibly editors?

First Copyright Date: Letters and diary entries were from 1870-1871, while the story was put together and

published in 2012

Type of Book: France, War, history, Commune, Diplomacy, Franco-Prussian relations, Paris, Siege, 1870-1871

General Subject Matter: France, Paris 1870-1871

Special Features: There is a map of Paris in front as well as a foreword and prologue talking about Elihu Washburne's life before he went to Paris and got stranded there. There's also an index at the back as well.

Price: US: 26 dollars, Canada, 29 dollars

ISBN: 978-1-4516-6528-4

Possibility on why this subject:

"Elihu Washburne and all those caught up in what happened are long gone now, of course. How many today have any idea even of when the Franco-Prussian War or the Siege of Paris or the reign of the Commune happened?...But we need to know, if only because the Franco-Prussian War was Part One of a titanic struggle between France and Germany that was to be followed by the horrors of World War I and World War II." (xxi)

Point of view:

From the background that was given about Elihu Washburne, one can say it's an American point of view. Elihu basically earned his status and was not born to wealth. He acquired it on his own. Mainly it's a first person narrative, but digging deeper we have someone compassionate who sticks to his duty and does his best to help the underdogs. (He helped the German women and children.) Yet when the action begins, he is wealthy and has rubbed elbows with the rich and famous so to speak.

Give Information:

Personally the author was trying to give information, and I believe that in order to keep record and relieve the tedium of being shut in, he wrote in diary of what was happening as sort of a therapy for himself.

General Field or Genre/How book fits into it:

This book deals with Franco-Prussian War of 1870, as well as the aftermath of the Commune. It takes place completely in Paris and here we have records of what Parisians did when starvation was imminent as well as their blunders and failures in retaking Paris. It also shows how volatile people are under these conditions and their unpredictability.

Audience:

The intended audience was himself. I doubt that he desired for anyone else to read his thoughts or to know his thoughts. The book is interspersed with letters to his wife and State of Secretary named Fish, but primarily it's the diary of his activities in Paris as well as observations of what's going on.

Author's Style:

The style struck me as dry and informal. The author simply recorded things and although he tried to shock me, for some odd reason my cynicism of his "never happened in history," rang false. Mostly the book focuses on war and political matters going on, or complaints about lack of what is going. Once in a while his family and how much he misses them is mentioned as well.

Suit intended Audience:

Perhaps the writing suited him, but I'm not sure about what others have thought.

Table of Contents:

This is written chronologically and if you count prologue and epilogue, its divided into eight chapters:

Prologue: Covers Elihu Washburne's life from the time he was born up until 1870.

1. War and Revolution cover the period of when France had war with Germany and they lost, causing Germany to start blockade Paris. Takes place from his arrival on July 19th, 1870 up until September 16th, 1870
 2. Siege begins with September 19th, 1870 up until November 29th, 1870 and begins the downward spiral of description of life in Paris, such as loss of beauty and hopelessness and so forth.
 3. Desperation and Despair begins with December 1 1870 up until January 1st, 1871 and describes more of the war and waiting for news that Elihu has to tolerate.
 4. Defeat begins on January 2nd, 1871 up until January 28th, 1871 and describes more of the same, especially how Parisians begin begging for peace between France and Germany.
 5. Peace begins with January 29th, 1871 up until March 21st, 1871 and has praises of other people towards Elihu as well as the fact that Prussians leave Paris in peace.
 6. Reign of Terror begins with March 18th 1871 up until June 2nd, 1871 and overthrow of government as well as the revolution and killing of bishop begin to fill up the pages. There is also a war between the government in Marseilles and that of Paris. It ends in peace
- Epilogue starts with June 7, 1871 and describes how Elihu was received by various friends and people who owed him their lives, then proceeded to record the rest of his life, including how he and President Grant stopped being friends and so forth. It ended with his funeral and where he is buried.

How Book affected me:

Although there were some dramatized parts, or so I felt, I was amazed at how in beginning it was all normal, then oh so slowly Paris slid in a downward spiral. I guess Parisians eating dogs and cats was not that surprising. I'm surprised that no cannibalism was mentioned of. Although I felt that the writing tended to be boring, and I still don't really see the link between this war and how from it came World War I and World War II, it was an interesting read on what its like to live under these circumstances and conditions. I have to applaud Elihu Washburne for his bravery and what he had to go through.

Achieved Goal:

I really didn't see the link between World Wars and this particular war. It would have helped if they could explain the link in more detail. What I saw was the Parisian War and that's that.

Recommend the book:

I would recommend the book for those who have to do research. Its not something that should be read for fun unless you want to see how life deteriorates under these conditions or unless you want to become more

familiar with French history.

Theme:

These are Elihu's letters and diary during the siege of Paris and commune of Paris from 1870 up until 1871.

Thesis:

This is a vital work in understanding the siege as well as the commune during the years of 1870 up until 1871.

Quick notes: I won this book on goodreads.com thus this review will appear in its entirety on goodreads as well as the blog

3 out of 5

(0: Stay away unless a masochist 1: Good for insomnia 2: Horrible but readable; 3: Readable and quickly forgettable, 4: Good, enjoyable 5: Buy it, keep it and never let

Chuck says

Michael Hill 's "Elihu Washburne : The Diary and Letters of America's Minister to France During the Siege and Commune of Paris" is a well edited compendium of Elihu Washburne's letters, diary, and other sources mixed with the editor's judicious providing of context. The book covers Washburne's tenure just before and during the Franco-Prussian War and ensuing siege of Paris.

I found the book well written, easy to read and quite informative. Washburne had access to all the major participants on the French side, and many on the German side as well. The only real negative I felt was that Washburne as a member of the elite class, generally focused on and sympathized with the elite classes. He did however, at least in his own retelling, did work extremely hard to identify and alleviate suffering of all those he encountered, no matter what their background.

All in all, a fascinating look into what was going on in Paris during the Franco-Prussian War, Siege of Paris, and Commune.

I would recommend this book to anyone interested in France during the Franco-Prussian War, the Siege of Paris, or the Coommune.

Tristan says

I received a free copy of this book through Goodreads' First Reads. It chronicles a really remarkable story. Michael Hill was David McCullough's research assistant, and this book came about as they were doing research for McCullough's book The Greater Journey. That research uncovered never-before-known journals of Washburne's that had been untouched in the Library of Congress. While McCullough quotes excerpts from those journals, it was great to read a much larger portion of them in Hill's book, and in their original context.

Prior to reading this book, I knew little about the siege and Commune of Paris other than the bare facts that they took place and that 1871 was one of the major milestones in French revolutions. (1789, 1830, and 1848 being the others.) I also didn't know a lot about Elihu Washburne other than that he was a political friend of Abraham Lincoln's from their early days in Illinois politics (Washburne was a Congressman from Illinois from 1853-1869), plus the odd story here and there about Washburne's support for and interactions with Lincoln once the latter became president.

I gained immeasurable respect for Washburne as a result of this volume. Washburne earned a lot of goodwill for the U.S. from many countries by staying in Paris when most other ambassadors abandoned the city once war was declared between France and Germany in 1870. Although Washburne had no diplomatic experience whatsoever, this was arguably a strength during the ensuing 4 months of siege followed by the horrors of the Paris Commune. The first Secretary of the American Legation wrote of Washburne: "Had he been brought up in diplomacy he would have hesitated and read up on precedents... It is quite as well that the head of an embassy should be a new man. He will attach much less importance to trifles, and act more fearlessly in emergencies." This turned out to be the case--Washburne simply did what needed to be done, whether it tended to accord with diplomatic protocol or not. Nevertheless, he continued to be respected by both the French and the Germans, not to mention by other countries who admired his work.

Washburne's accounts of his travails are both fascinating and touching. Not only did Washburne stick around to help the Americans in Paris and make sure they were safe, the German government turned to him to help Germans living in Paris when war broke out. Washburne ended up personally helping some 20,000 German men, women, and children to get out of the city. When the siege made it impossible to leave the city, he continued helping obtain food, clothing, and medical attention for thousands more. As Washburne's own deprivations increased--at one point many in the city were reduced to eating horses, cats, dogs, and rats--his willingness to share what he had with Germans in great need is incredibly touching. Washburne's selfless service was simply remarkable. After the war, Bismarck sent Washburne his personal thanks and that of the German Emperor, and of course the French appreciated his sticking it out in the midst of such terrible times.

Overall, this was a fascinating book. Any book made of journal entries could easily be dry reading, but Hill's book manages to avoid this and present an incredible story in the voice of an admirable public servant. I will never read anecdotes about Elihu Washburne the same.

Grumpus says

I won this book through the Goodreads giveaway. I don't enter every giveaway for the sake of getting free books. I enter only those that I truly want to win. So, in keeping with a promise to myself and the spirit of the giveaways, I will always write something about my fortune wins.

Being a history lover, I thought I would enjoy this but I found it dull reading. While I admire his service to our country during this time, I found the diary entries rather dull and the book did not pull me along and with so much on my reading list, I had to bail half way through.

I appreciate the opportunity to have won the book and its a pity that not enjoy it more.
