



William Tecumseh Sherman: In the Service of My Country: A Life

James Lee McDonough

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A major new biography of one of America's most storied military figures.

General Sherman's 1864 burning of Atlanta solidified his legacy as a ruthless leader. Yet Sherman proved far more complex than his legendary military tactics reveal. James Lee McDonough offers fresh insight into a man tormented by the fear that history would pass him by, who was plagued by personal debts, and who lived much of his life separated from his family. As a soldier, Sherman evolved from a spirited student at West Point into a general who steered the Civil War's most decisive campaigns, rendered here in graphic detail. Lamenting casualties, Sherman sought the war's swift end by devastating Southern resources in the Carolinas and on his famous March to the Sea. This meticulously researched biography explores Sherman's warm friendship with Ulysses S. Grant, his strained relationship with his wife, Ellen, and his unassuageable grief over the death of his young son, Willy. The result is a remarkable, comprehensive life of an American icon whose legacy resonates to this day.

William Tecumseh Sherman: In the Service of My Country: A Life Details

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From Reader Review William Tecumseh Sherman: In the Service of My Country: A Life for online ebook

Carl Rollyson says

William Tecumseh Sherman's (1820–91) march to the sea and burning of Atlanta are surely what distinguish him as a Civil War general, second only to Ulysses S. Grant. If Grant split the Confederacy in two during the siege and conquest of Vicksburg, Sherman brought the war home to countless thousands of Southerners. , Pillaging the land and its resources, he waged what is sometimes called total war. If he did not break the South's will to resist, he did destroy the Confederacy's belief that it could prevail outside the bounds of the Union.

As James Lee McDonough argues, Sherman would have rejected the idea that he invented modern warfare. He gave orders to spare private dwellings and public structures that had no value as war-making institutions. Although, as Mr. McDonough concedes, a good deal of unsanctioned destruction occurred as more than one hundred thousand soldiers decimated Georgia and then later the Carolinas, Sherman did punish soldiers who disobeyed his orders.

Sherman's presumed protests notwithstanding, he was an innovator—and very much a modern man—in his grasp of logistics and topography. Again and again, Southern armies took up seemingly impregnable positions, and Sherman outflanked them, drawing on his superb understanding of terrain and years of careful observation practiced while stationed in the antebellum South. He understood Southerners very well and even headed a military academy in Louisiana just before the fall of Fort Sumter.

Mr. McDonough presents a Sherman who very much corresponds with another the figure portrayed in another recent biographer's account. In *Fierce Patriot: The Tangled Lives of William Tecumseh Sherman* (2014), Robert L. O'Connell calls McDonough's book "superbly researched and richly detailed." And so it is: a biography that is the product of a historian's lifelong study, including research into several Civil War battles, including Shiloh, where Sherman had his first combat experience when surprised by a Confederate attack. In that disaster, Sherman acquitted himself well, realizing that he could lead men in the most desperate of circumstances and, like Admiral Nelson, directly exposing himself to the enemy, thus earning the unwavering support of his army.

It is hard to exaggerate the magnitude of Sherman's achievement as a general. Sherman saw no service in the Mexican War. Before Sherman and Grant, no American general had been obliged to deal with massive numbers of troops; in the Mexican War, General Winfield Scott took Mexico City with less than a fifth of the hundred thousand-plus soldiers Sherman commanded during the Civil War. A student of European Wars, Sherman taught his men how to forage and travel well beyond conventional supply lines. They followed him everywhere—into swamps and forests—and marveled that Sherman never got lost.

Not that Sherman's accomplishments came easily. At the start of the war, he believed he could not rely on volunteer soldiers. Sherman was, to put it bluntly, a West Point snob, and it took him some time to understand that he could make a group of volunteers jell into a powerful fighting force. But like Dwight Eisenhower, Sherman knew how to drill men, how to keep them occupied and focused on their mission. Sherman himself was with them in the field at all times, almost never giving himself leave to see family in Ohio.

If you have read,Mr. O'Connell, you may well ask, "Do I need to read McDonough?" Absolutely. For one

thing, O'Connell, as his subtitle indicates, tends to carve Sherman up, claiming that watching him is like being at a "three-ring circus . . . too distracting to watch all simultaneously, which is what previous biographers have tried to do. So Mr. O'Connell splits Sherman into three narratives: "the strategic man, the general, the human being." Each narrative is taut and well done, and yet there are overlaps that result in repetitions that mar our cumulative understanding of Sherman's motivations and achievements. It is disconcerting to return to his childhood in the middle of Mr. O'Connell's book when that childhood—especially Sherman's father's early death and his adoption by a prominent Ohio politician—so clearly influenced Sherman's choices and behavior. To a biographer like Mr. McDonough, the romance is in the details, which partly explains why Mr. McDonough's biography is more than three hundred pages longer than Mr. O'Connell's.

The basic picture of Sherman is the same in both biographies, but the nuances and emphases are different. And in some ways Mr. O'Connell's account is more vivid. Mr. McDonough, for example, cites a few occasions when Sherman relied for intelligence on slaves, who were reliable and eager to help Union troops locate rebel armies. But Mr. O'Connell goes much farther. He suggests that in effect countless numbers of slaves made significant contributions to the war effort, contributions Sherman never quite acknowledged. Perhaps Mr. McDonough, a careful documentarian, had trouble actually verifying the magnitude of the slaves' involvement.

Both biographers regret Sherman's resistance to using African Americans as combat soldiers, even though Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and others pressured the general to do so. Instead, Sherman handed his black troops shovels and gave them other jobs ancillary to the war effort. Sherman thought of African Americans as an inferior race, as both biographers show. Mr. McDonough is especially perceptive about Sherman's postwar policies, which were, unfortunately, consonant with those of Southern segregationists. But both biographers present compelling evidence that not only did Sherman's treat freed slaves with decency and even respect, he was not averse to sitting down with them, chatting and sharing his cigars.

The two biographers are also fascinated with Sherman's theatrical personality. Mr. O'Connell is especially compelling here, showing how Sherman "played his role to the hilt, alternating between model conqueror and modern Attila, sowing confusion and fear and in the end breeding despair" in the "last stages of the March to the Sea."

And yet these biographers left me wanting more of Sherman, a reaction his own men shared, never allowing him to appear in public without giving a speech. And Sherman never failed to deliver stirring words, without notes or prior preparation. This observation leads me to an astounding phrase in Mr. O'Connell's narrative, p. 301: "Cump, [Sherman's nickname] who briefly played Hamlet in St. Louis, was the obvious focus of the campaign . . ." What? Tell me more! I searched Mr. O'Connell's notes but could find no source for the Hamlet reference. As Montaigne said so long ago, these kinds of details tell us so much about the biographical subject. Why did Sherman play Hamlet? Did he ever play other roles? And how did he play Hamlet? I envision him as Rebecca West's Hamlet: not an indecisive youth, but the hotheaded redhead that was Sherman, who, like Hamlet scolding the king, would tell President Lincoln his business.

So much about Sherman fascinates. He had a powerful aesthetic sense. Was his love of dancing, for example, for the choreography of moves, related to his desire to parade his men? They did not simply march. They marched as Sherman taught them to march. He put on a show every bit as flamboyant as those staged by Buffalo Bill Cody, a friend of Sherman's. We speak of the theater of war for a reason.

Such a man, one would think, would want to be president. But Sherman never sought the job and famously said he would not accept the nomination and would not serve if elected. And he never understood why his friend Grant wanted the job. Sherman was contemptuous of politicians. Neither biographer says so, but I

think in part this attitude grew out of Sherman's belief that politicians were poor actors. Sherman understood his role was as a soldier, and he spent the post-Civil War years cleaning out the West—that is, fighting and destroying Native American culture and clearing the way for the transcontinental railroad. Despite of his middle name, he advocated extermination, not co-existence.

To meet Sherman was to like him—unless you were Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and disapproved of Sherman's anti-black bias and efforts to make peace with Southern generals, even though his remit specified he was to avoid a political settlement. In person, Sherman was personable. But this is the man who said war is hell, and he meant it.

Michael Burnam-Fink says

A truly great biography reveals both the subject and the spirit of the times, and McDonough does both, tracing the tumultuous American adolescence through the life of General Sherman. Sherman was born in the Old Northwest of Ohio, named after the powerful Indian chief Tecumseh, who had lead a failed coalition against the Americans. After his father died, he was adopted into the influential Ewing family, and went to West Point, where he thrived as a cadet and in his early posting to Florida during the Seminole Wars, and California during the Mexican-American Wars. Early military posting across the South and Mississippi convinced him of the importance of the American heartland, and ironically in light of his later career, the basic friendship of Southerners. Sherman had a marriage to Ellen Ewing troubled by his wife's staunch Catholicism, and an uncertain career as a banker, when the Civil War broke out, and lifted Sherman to greatness.

Sherman struggled as a commander in the opening phases of the war, but he was never "insane", except in scurrilous newspaper columns, and after the Battle of Shiloh, repeatedly demonstrated his abilities as a strategist and logistician. Sherman excelled in operations along major rivers and railroads to dislocate strongpoints and force Confederate armies back without battle. His campaign to capture Atlanta was a masterpiece of maneuver.

Sherman's name will be forever connected with the March to the Sea, and scorched earth warfare. McDonough justifies the strategy as necessary in a framework of total war, and argues it was carried out as humanely as possible, without mass violence. Georgia howled, as Sherman burned anything with a potential military use, from railroads to cotton bales. In his use of economic warfare against the South and American Indians on the frontier, Sherman prefigured the worst of the 20th century.

Post-war, Sherman served as General-in-chief for over a decade, and took up a whirlwind of social engagements, speeches, and nights at the theater. The Sherman who comes across in his letters is a man of strong opinions: pro-Union, anti-Catholic, opposed to political nonsense and journalistic slander, confident in the superiority of white people, while still able to treat individual blacks and Indians humanely. As McDonough reveals through letters and archival research, Sherman was not above shading his memoirs in his favor, but in general he was scrupulously honest. A great biography of a fascinating man!

Tom Rowe says

4.5 stars

I have always thought that Sherman looked like an interesting guy. In pictures, he always seems to have a scowl on his face, a five day growth of beard, and permanently tousled hair. It turns out, he is very interesting.

From semi-orphan, to West Point cadet, to soldier, to banker, to victorious general, General Sherman's life fills this 28 hour audio book with adventure after adventure. The book breaks down Sherman's life to 30% pre-war, 60% Civil War, and 10% post war. The pre-war and Civil War sections seem to pace very well, but the post war section seems rushed. Perhaps, it was just not interesting enough to merit the detail of the other two periods of Sherman's life.

McDonough does a great job at trying to get to who Sherman was. He takes the time to look at various views on Sherman and analyze them. However, the greatest strength is how McDonough uses Sherman's own words and his correspondence with others. McDonough goes beyond recounting the professional life of Sherman, he looks at his personal life. So often, biographies of historical figures ignore the relationships between the subjects and their children or spouses, but McDonough really delves into this so much that you grieve with Sherman at the losses in his life.

Particularly interesting was Sherman's relationship with his wife and her Catholicism which is a major theme in this book. It is a great example of how Sherman was a man of his times. While Sherman is very likable and interesting it is hard not to judge him on his many prejudices. It is interesting to note that even Sherman recognizes his own prejudices and how they seem to soften and harden throughout his life.

This was one of those biographies that saddened me at the end because at the end, when Sherman died, I felt it was the death of a real human being with all his positive and negative aspects. I h

I highly recommend this book.

Caroline says

A perennial problem with biographies of military figures is that they tend to skate over all the before and after material in order to focus on what the war or military campaign that made that person famous. Thankfully, in this biography of Sherman, it is very much 'a life' as the title says - McDonough devotes as much attention to Sherman's life before and after the Civil War as the four years of its duration. After all, whilst it may have the formative experience of his life, four years out of seventy-odd is too few to sustain the weight of an entire 'life'.

It is curious how many of the major generals of the Civil War struggled in their pre-war lives - Grant and Sherman being only the two most prominent examples. Perhaps it is a classic example of the difficulties military men experience in peacetime - what do men bred for war do when there is no war? Sherman struggled throughout his life with debt, with a family constantly urging him to leave the army, to turn his plentiful talents to other more profitable paths. Yet when he finally did, pursuing a career as a bank, he found no fortune, although through no lack of his own and his bank's troubles would have been far far worse in the various crashes and troubles of the era had it not been for Sherman's cool head in a crisis, determination, integrity and commitment to duty - all traits that would serve him well in the War.

The Civil War made Sherman, as it made Grant - and together they must surely go down in history as one of, if not the most successful military partnership in history. There was no ego between them, and they trusted

one another implicitly. It was this bond that allowed them to operate in tandem to finally defeat the South, and allowed Sherman to set off on his famous 'March to the Sea', cutting loose from all supply lines and operating independently and in isolation in enemy territory, bringing total war to the civilian population. It was Sherman's chance to show the world his formidable military genius - as much for organisational ability, management and logistics as military strategy. Indeed, Sherman was a general who loathed bloodshed and massive casualties, who far preferred to manoeuvre his enemy out of positions than to fling troops headlong in attack. It is no wonder he is regarded as perhaps the first 'modern' general.

Sherman comes across in this biography as an immensely appealing man - although no doubt Southerners would disagree - a man who enjoyed theatre and dancing, outgoing and gregarious, a fine public speaker, a man of integrity and discipline, a man driven by ambition but not by ego, capable of great humility and restraint at times. If all history remembers of Sherman is the March to the Sea, it is doing him a grave disservice - one that thankfully this excellent biography does much to remedy.

William Monaco says

McDonough's new biography on Sherman does an excellent job detailing the events of the general's life, especially his antebellum years and career in the army. However, he spends so much detail outlining the many battles and marching formations that I felt like there wasn't enough of Sherman the person at the expense of Sherman the military genius.

My biggest complaint about the book is that it doesn't have a thesis. At a moment in history where war seems ubiquitous, I expected a biography of Grant's second-in-command - who spent almost his entire life serving the country - to in some way connect to or reflect on present day. There is much to be learned about Sherman's philosophy and execution of war, but McDonough focuses on merely presenting the facts rather than analyze them.

While I enjoyed the biography and learned a lot, in the end the scope was too narrow and at times it ventured into overly detailed Civil War battle summaries.

Erika says

My father loved this book and gave it to me for my 66th birthday. The huge book with 796 pages including the notes. I started by the end of the book and decided it was well worth the effort. A life and a book which corresponds exactly to my needs of understanding today. I am ever grateful. It helps a woman to understand more deeply the life and thoughts of a great military man.

The American Conservative says

President Rutherford B. Hayes wrapped up his speech early to the crowds at the Ohio State Fair Grounds in Columbus in August 1880 because it was slapping down rain, and he was trying to be considerate of the tens of thousands of people in attendance. But a large segment of that audience was having none of it. Thousands of old Union Army veterans set up a chant: "Sherman! Sherman! Sherman!" They didn't mind standing in the rain if they could hear a speech from one of the men up on the stage with the president: William

Tecumseh Sherman, who had commanded many of those veterans during the American Civil War 20 years before.

Sherman took the podium to uproarious applause. He was then 60 and occupied the position of commanding general of the Army. Since he hadn't been scheduled to speak, his remarks were improvised—and one of them became immortal. He wryly said that the old soldiers in the crowd wouldn't mind a little rain since they'd seen worse during the war. And he worked his way around to a line he'd spoken and written before, a line that would lodge him in every quotation book in the world: "There is many a boy here today who looks on war as all glory, but boys it is all hell."

<http://www.theamericanconservative.co...>

Darien says

Didn't really love it, but Sherman seems like an interesting person, if kind of terrible. That said, learned a lot I didn't know about the Civil War and can appreciate how people get interested in seeing battlegrounds in person. Custer, Sherman...on to Grant, I suppose!

Mike says

William Tecumseh Sherman was one of those Civil War figures I had read a great deal about through biographies of other generals, but I had never read anything specific to him. This book is a very comprehensive look at his time before and during the Civil War. I thought the author was very fair presenting all sides of him, although he did seem to err on the side of assuming Sherman was always in the right when it came to military decisions. I wish there was more detail about Sherman after the War as I would have loved to have read more about that. In terms of the battles, they are written very well, but there were not enough maps included to help me visualize the troop movements and the terrain. Recommended for Civil War fans.

Dave says

The cover of James Lee McDonough's recent biography gives a glimpse of what is inside. Staring back is the fierce gaze of an intense warrior. The colorized photograph of William Tecumseh Sherman, one of America's greatest generals, shows a man ready for war, one who knows the terrible cost of battle and is prepared to pay the price.

"William Tecumseh Sherman: In the Service of My Country: A Life" is a comprehensive look at the complex man who famously said "War is all hell." McDonough plumbs the depths of this great leader – peerless as a tactician and strategist – who understood there was no glory in combat, only sacrifice. The ultimate goal was not necessarily victory on the battlefield, but the destruction of your enemy's ability to conduct war.

McDonough provides a clear perspective into the mind of Sherman, a complicated person who was full of

contradictions. He identified deeply with the South, yet he was determined to bring the Secessionists back into the Union. He reviled Catholicism, yet he married a Catholic and was deeply in love with her despite a flawed marriage. He was overwhelmingly racist, yet could be extremely magnanimous with the freed slaves who flocked to his army as it marched through the South.

Through meticulous research and with stark prose, McDonough details Sherman's path from orphan in Ohio to hero of the Union. His austere march through history began simply but would culminate in a flourish. By the end of the Civil War, he was so highly regarded and admired by the nation's citizens that he could have easily removed his general's stars and walked into the Oval Office. Though highly opinionated about the government, he abhorred politics and wanted nothing more than to remain a soldier.

Sherman is often remembered for his "March to the Sea" through Georgia, yet he himself believed it was the following campaigns through South and North Carolina that brought ultimate victory to the North. By attacking these "breadbasket" states previously sheltered from the ravages of war, he snapped the back of the Confederacy and made even the most recalcitrant Rebel citizen realize they could not escape paying the cost of their transgressions. Sherman and his troops would exact a frightful price in destroyed infrastructure, pillaged farmland and leveled towns that would leave the South bowed and broken – and ready for peace.

McDonough even offers an interesting insight into one of Sherman's most difficult moments. At the beginning of the Civil War, he suffered a mental breakdown and was believed to be completely incapacitated by his superior officers. The author shows how Sherman – at the time military commander of Kentucky, a position he did not want – gave way to his demons and succumbed to darker notions of the war. As McDonough carefully points out, the general was so consumed with the defense of his command that he had foregone eating, sleeping, and exercise to the point where complete emotional and mental collapse was inevitable.

Of course, Sherman rebounded, thanks in a great deal to the compassionate care of his wife, and would resume his role as an effective and eventually victorious leader. McDonough's thorough research and critical analysis detail the events that led to his breakdown and offer an insightful explanation of the episode.

If nothing else, Sherman learned his lesson by better understanding his own shortcomings. His fierceness as a leader and determination to succeed had to be tempered by the reality of his physical and mental limitations. He was asthmatic and prone to an intense spirit that could run wild at times. To endure the grueling pace of a horrible war, the general would need to take care of himself.

McDonough's biography is a wonderful introspective into the mind of one of America's greatest military leaders. It does not bog down in details of battles and campaigns but rather provides a better understanding of what Sherman was thinking as he made the crucial decisions that would leave an indelible mark on our nation's history. "William Tecumseh Sherman: In the Service of My Country: A Life" is well worth the read!

Coyner Kelley says

I will confess that the prospect of 700 plus pages of detailed reports on Civil War battles was daunting. After the prologue's description of Shiloh, I was in even though I find detailed hour by hour battle descriptions inherently challenging (By the way, I probably would not have started if a friend had not asked thrown down

the fellow Southern gauntlet.) Here are five more reasons to read McDonough's biography:

1. Extensive reliance on Sherman's voluminous correspondence

Sherman often wrote 7 or eight letters a day. These were note email or tweet in length; reportedly many were six or more pages long. The correspondence informs of us his family relationship including decades of his relationship with his step-sister then wife, his military and business career, his relationship with Grant and others, and more.

2. Biographies within biographies

Many biographies give us history lessons alongside biographies. Think Caro and Johnson and Moses, Downey and Queen Isabella, McCullough and Lincoln. This one gives us dozens of mini-biographical sketches of other political and military figures of the time.

3. Role of West Point in forming leadership of 19th-century officers

4. Portrait of the maddening prejudices of Sherman

Like McDonough, I was surprised at my interest in Sherman and angered by his disdain for slaves and freedmen and women, his pro-slavery views, and his role in the "Indian" Wars before the Civil War.

5. Depiction of Post War relationship between Sec. of War and General in Chief.

Jerome says

A very readable and well-researched biography of Sherman.

While McDonough doesn't present anything new, his narrative is easy to read and hard to put down. He is particularly good at describing Sherman's qualities as a military man, and how his thinking evolved within the context of the era. McDonough also brings up Sherman's repeated subordinate commands, suggesting that this was mostly due to army politics and that Sherman preferred these positions because it allowed him to avoid political questions. At the same time, McDonough shows how shrewd Sherman could be when it came to politics, despite his aversion, and how visionary he could be. The author also covers Sherman's banking career, arguing that his failures here were more due to economics than his own financial ineptness.

The section on the March to the Sea is a bit dull, however, and Sherman himself never quite comes to life. Still, a broad, energetic biography.

William says

Audio book along with hard copy and ebook

Well researched and covers all aspects of his life. The reader has a good grasp of what WTS is before the civil war. This is very important because during the CW, many factions, military professionals, politicians, and the press, put out a lot of untruths for their personal gain.

I took a long time with this in order to let each phase set in. I recommend this with studying history.

Fred Svoboda says

Excellent biography places Sherman in the context of his time, culture, and personal life rather than merely

telling the story of his Civil War success. This makes the book of far greater value than a more limited treatment and worth the time investment its length requires. Whether we are seeing Sherman as a West Point cadet, or as a banker in post-Gold Rush California, or as a military academy president in Louisiana as the Civil War is about to begin, or as an honored old man, we get a real sense of his context. Even his loving but difficult marriage (to his foster sister, an avid Roman Catholic who could never manage to live within his salary) is worth our attention and reveals his character. Sherman was probably a racist by our standards, but over all he treated African-Americans well and even sympathized with the Plains Indians he thought were justifiably bound for destruction. He was a man of great intelligence and skepticism--which latter factor probably helps make him of particular interest to readers of the 21st Century.

David Buhler says

Very well written biography of one of the most intelligent men in the military history of the USA. Using primary sources such as letters, Sherman often wrote 30 in a day, and not only his but letters of his brother John, a senator; his wife; his father-in-law; his children; his commander U.S. Grant who became a great friend of Sherman..... He is famed for his march through Georgia to the sea, but he regarded that as trivial compared to his march through the Carolinas in difficult conditions, crossing marshes up to the waist, logs, rivers, and in winter time I believe. He was beloved by his soldiers who called him Uncle Billy. Not to be missed by Civil war buffs, but really anyone who loves a downright interesting biography.
