

Taking a Look at 'Grant' Twenty-five Years Later

WILLIAM S. McFEELY

IT IS AN HONOR TO BE ASKED to give the Baron Lecture at the Society. It is fun to look back over a quarter of a century to my *Grant*. I have been asked, or perhaps, given license to reflect on how I came to write the book and how I feel about it after twenty-five years—or twenty-six. Jim Moran and I have been guilty of a little false advertising. *Grant: A Biography* was published in 1981.

To begin at the beginning, it was a book that I never expected to write. It was a product of its time. Since it took me ten years to write the book, we are back at the close of the 1960s when the idea hit me. In that decade, the Civil Rights movement commanded my attention. As a northerner trying to make sense of all the troubles in the South, I perversely thought I might be able to comprehend it by looking not at the 1960s, but the 1860s. I was in graduate school; my dissertation, and my first book *Yankee Stepfather: General O. O. Howard and the Freedmen* was a study of the

WILLIAM S. McFEELY taught for many years at Mount Holyoke College and is currently the Abraham Baldwin Professor of the Humanities Emeritus at the University of Georgia. His many works of biography and history include: *Grant: A Biography* (1981); *Frederick Douglass* (1991), which won the Lincoln Prize; *Yankee Stepfather: General O. O. Howard and the Freedmen* (1983); *Sapelo's People: A Long Walk into Freedom* (1994); *Proximity to Death* (1999); and *Portrait: The Life of Thomas Eakins* (2006). This talk, the fourth annual Robert C. Baron Lecture, honors this past AAS chairman and president of Fulcrum Publishing, by inviting distinguished AAS members who have written seminal and prize-winning works of history to reflect on one book and its impact on scholarship and society.

Copyright © 2008 by William S. McFeely

Freedmen's Bureau designed to assist the former slaves adjust to freedom. The book told of gains made and then tragically reversed. My subjects were the forebears of the black southerners who, a hundred years later, struggled heroically to regain the promises of the first Reconstruction that had so cruelly been denied them.

The Freedmen's Bureau, a government agency charged with a welfare assignment, had begun doing excellent things to help the freed people adjust to freedom, only to be emasculated by President Andrew Johnson before he left office in 1869. It seemed logical that my second book be a study of Reconstruction in the presidency that followed. Grant, having won a war that ended slavery, was viewed by the freed people as second only to the fallen Lincoln, as their friend. Grant, handily elected president in 1868, was a Republican as were both houses of Congress. The Supreme Court had a majority of justices appointed by Republican Abraham Lincoln. How was it that the freed people, so hopeful at Grant's inaugural, were worse off when he left the White House than they were when he moved in?

But again the times closed in on me. I was teaching in an all-male university, the Vietnam War was on, and so was the draft. I was close to my students. One after another of them would come in my office to ask for advice. They knew I was opposed to the war and all of those who came in my office were as well. The talks were remarkably candid, and I learned a lot about young men's thoughts about war. I heard them out at great length, carefully saying that I, in my thirties with three children, was not in danger of being drafted. I would not tell them that they would pay no price for avoiding the draft.

With a monograph on Grant and Reconstruction underway, it struck me that Grant had had something to do with war as well. (I am notoriously slow on the uptake.) I began to wonder about his war and war in general. Somewhere I stumbled on a photograph of Grant, standing nonchalantly next to his tent at City Point in 1864, looking straight at the photographer Timothy O'Sullivan.

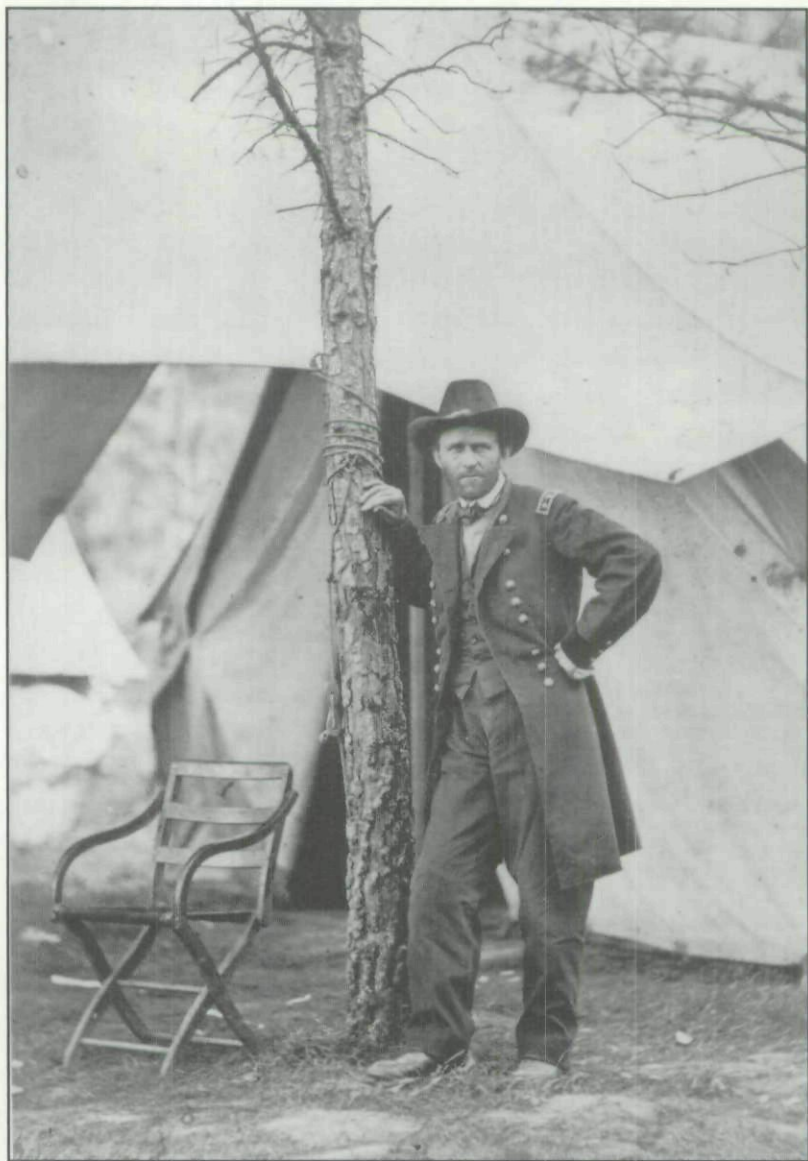


Fig. 1. General Ulysses S. Grant at his headquarters in Cold Harbor, Virginia, June 11 or 12, 1864 (formerly titled Grant at City Point). Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division. LC-USZ61-903.

And at us. There is nothing to suggest that he is in command of one of the largest armies in history. He looked like a perfectly nice guy, like anyone of the nice Yalies sitting in my office.

I was hooked. Without knowing it I was writing a biography. I can still remember, not long after the book came out, the first time I was referred to as a biographer. I had thought I was just a harmless historian vainly in quest of a book that most of my friends thought would probably never be finished. Others, less aware of my thinking, assumed that working all this time on Grant that I must be a war lover; who else would be so obsessed with Grant?

By August 1978, I thought I was through with wrestling with the tiger. I had mailed in a manuscript; my son was getting married; after that, my wife Mary and I were off for London where I would be teaching at University College for the year. Then the blow fell. My editor sent it back saying it wouldn't do; Grant gets lost in the underbrush of tangential material. I was furious. Chastened, I packed up all my research notes and the rejected manuscript and mailed it to London.

The year 1978-79 was a wonderful one. I was teaching in England where the education system is so fundamentally different from the American way of teaching that I had to flounder along trying to figure out what I was doing. In addition, Mary and I couldn't pass up all the theater and concerts in that city. And yet, on the top floor of the Institute of Historical Research at University College, in the solitude of the seldom consulted Dutch history collection, I started from scratch and completely rewrote the book.

By spring, still three years from publication, I knew I had a book. Mary had gone home for the college graduation of one of our daughters, and I was working in our flat in Islington before leaving for the graduation. Alone on a sunny spring day, sitting at the apartment's writing table, I got the final line: 'Now the silence was absolute.' I cried; I knew I was there.

I would like to come back to that last line in a minute, but first I owe you some reflection what the book did to me. For one thing I

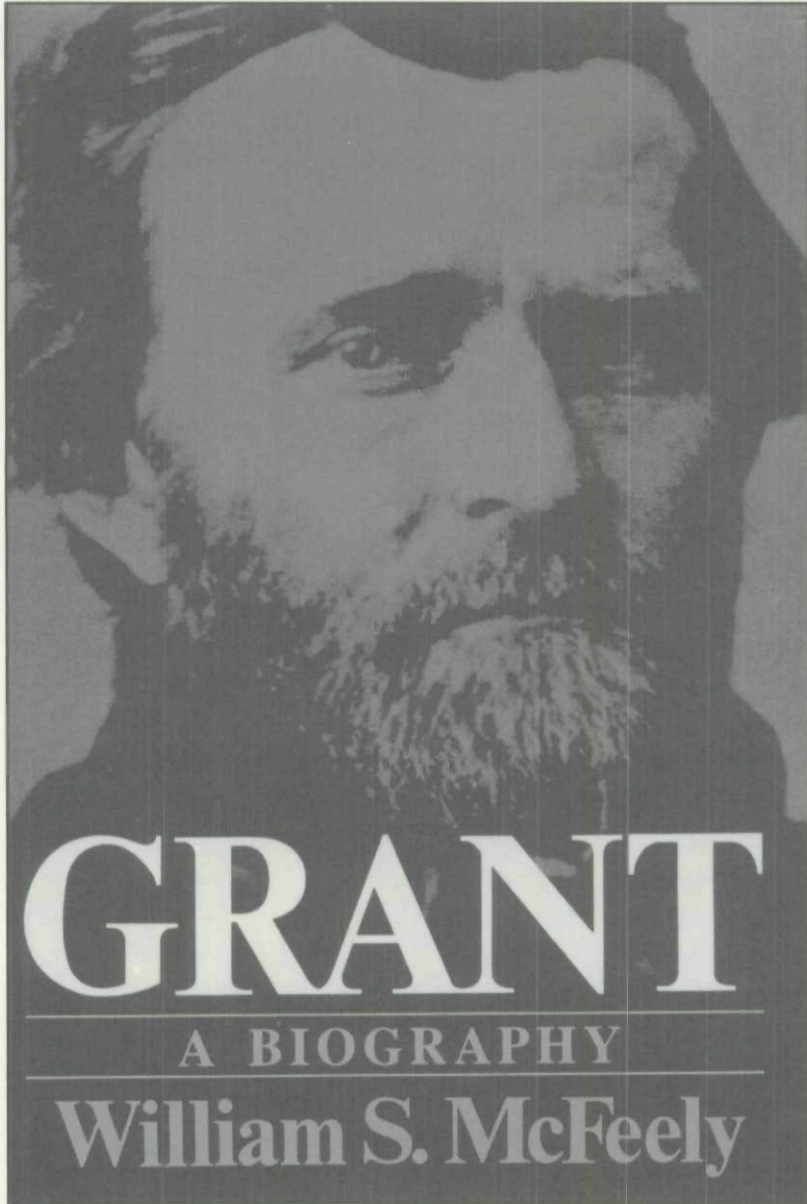


Fig. 2. *Grant, A Biography* (1981). As winner of the 1982 Pulitzer Prize in Biography, AAS member William S. McFeely was invited to present the fourth Robert C. Baron Lecture in which an author reflects on a prize-winning work twenty-five years or more after its publication.

learned that there are such things as 'Civil War Roundtables.' I had had no idea how vast was the interest in intricacies of that war. Members of these groups, usually male, are fascinated with everything from the minutiae of the equipment, guns, uniforms, to the precise placement of troops hour by hour in a battle. By and large, they seem to have a far greater interest in the events of battles, blue and grey, dispassionately studied, than in what the war was about. They care deeply about the generals—and there were scores of them—and read their biographies as well as studies of minor figures. They revel in detailed accounts of their favorite battles.

Suddenly, there I was with a biography of the most important general of all—and I was cannon fodder. I was invited to one after another meeting of roundtables all across the country. I soon was chastened; routinely the member knew more about Grant's battles than I did. My apologetic plea that I was not a military historian, that specific details of his battles were not my prime interest, fell on deaf ears. I had to slog my way through what seemed like an endless parade of these invitations.

There was a second reason I didn't enjoy post-mortems on the book. When I am through with one book, I like to get to work on a new one immediately. My eye was already on Frederick Douglass. I haven't read any of the four or five biographies of Grant that have come out since mine and I ducked sessions at meetings of professional historians where I would have been expected to defend my Grant against some one else's Grant. This is not as arrogant as it sounds; I have never liked the squabbles of convention panelists.

Are there things I would do differently? Here again, the times would dictate an addition. Given the great present day interest in the environment, I would have stressed more than I did the significance of Grant's creation in 1872 of the Yellowstone National Park. To quote the Park Service's website: 'A country that had not yet celebrated its centennial established Yellowstone the first national park in the world.' Unlike Eisenhower, to whom he is often

compared, Grant gave us the first of a glorious string of national parks and seashores, rather than a plethora of interstate highways.

I bet I wouldn't correct my skimpy last-minute mention of Civil Service Reform. It is just as dull a subject now as it was twenty-five years ago.

I am more troubled now than I was in 1981 over Grant's visit with Bismarck in Berlin at the time of the Congress of Berlin. I confess I was uneasy even then, but ducked my responsibility to say so. I had fun with the fact that Grant walked over to the Radziwill Palace, put out his cigar, and said to the guards, who probably didn't speak English, who he was. They were expecting a carriage and retinue, but recovered themselves, threw open the doors, and grandly admitted him. Bismarck, in uniform, greeted Grant as the great general who had reunited his country, as Bismarck had united his. Now I would have wanted to reflect less on the consequences of the creation of the great military empire that was Germany, and more on what the Civil War did to the United States.

Grant did make the crucial point with Bismarck that his war had ended slavery. It was only in ensuing years that his countrymen forgot what the Civil War was all about. America, despite Grant's largely ineffective efforts to protect the freed people, gave up on them and concentrated instead on increasing its industrial and commercial might. It may not be what Grant—a small "r" republican—anticipated, but his winning of the Civil War sowed seeds of the American empire that we are confronting now.

I think it is not too much of a stretch to say that the Civil War coarsened the American character. When Grant and Bismarck were genially chatting, Bismarck remarked bitterly on the wounding of the elderly emperor Wilhelm I by a would-be assassin. Grant, or so it is reported (the two were alone; the reporter with the *New York Herald* traveling with Grant later published the account of the meeting), said 'the influence that aimed at the Emperor's life was an influence that would destroy all government, all society, republics and empires. . . . "All you can do with

such people," said the general quietly, "is to kill them. Precisely so," answered the prince.'

I did call this a 'chilling exchange,' but I was being almost as obtuse about the death penalty as were the people I criticized in a later book, *Proximity to Death*, a study of people fighting the death penalty in Georgia. Research that I did for that book revealed that just before the Civil War the nation was on the way to ending the death penalty. Grant was cognizant of this; he told Bismarck that 'at home there is strong sentiment against the death penalty, and it is a sentiment that one naturally respects. I am not sure but it should be made more severe rather than less severe.' I was congratulated on not making value judgments in *Grant*, but I think now I might have found a word stronger than 'chilling' for Grant's callousness.

My own antiwar sentiments are as strong now in 2007 as they were as I contemplated the Civil War in light of the Vietnam War. When I began writing this lecture, I expected that I would wish that I had underscored the horrors of war more than I did. I looked at how I had treated Cold Harbor, the most merciless of all Grant's battles, and I decided that the understatement I had employed did a pretty good job.

Years later Grant stated that he regretted the assault on June 3, 1864, at Cold Harbor, but this admission doesn't explain away his and Lee's inexcusable behavior in the hours and days following the battle. Union soldiers, who had charged, lay where they had fallen wounded, moaning in the blistering sun. Their brothers watched their torment, unable to retrieve them because of Confederate sharpshooters. After two days, on June 5, Grant sent one of Meade's aides across the lines with a letter suggesting the firing cease while litter bearers went out on the field. Lee insisted that a 'flag of truce be sent, as it customary,' The next morning, June 6, Grant wrote Lee that at noon men with stretchers and white flags would go out for the wounded, but again Lee insisted that he could 'accede with propriety' only to a request made under a flag of truce: 'I have directed that any parties you may send out be turned back.' Grant, that afternoon, reminded Lee that 'wounded men are now

suffering from want of attention and agreed to a formal two-hour truce. Lee replied that it was too late to accomplish this by daylight, but agreed to a break between 8:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. that evening. The letter was received by Grant after 10:45 p.m., and it was not until late the next morning, June 7, that Grant wrote and informed Lee of the missed opportunity. Lee then proposed, and Grant accepted, a second truce, which took place that evening. For days, as commanders stupidly corresponded, untended men had lain in agony dying. While they lay there, Grant sat down and wrote the most affectionate of fatherly letters to Nellie. She would soon be nine, and he told her he would get her a buggy for the family pony. He simply shut off the horrors for which he was responsible and retreated into a fantasy of comfortable domesticity.¹

Certainly one of the nicest compliments came from my mentor in graduate school who saw the book for the first time as a bound galley. (This was a separation I had to make. It had to be my book.) He said that I had not made Grant a hero or a villain. He particularly liked that I did not let Grant off the hook with the shopworn excuse that his failures were due to the times, that they were inevitable. C. Vann Woodward always held that inevitability needed all the refutation historians could muster.

He and his wife Glenn also decided I could write. He was reading snatches to her and called one evening laughing over my description of Julia Grant as 'stumpy.' I am guilty of that, but in defense of my feminist credentials, I also gave her due credit as a major player in the Grant story. In fact, I had once considered making the book a dual biography, but Julia kept Ulysses's letters—and we have them—he kept none of hers.

I can't resist telling a couple of review stories. When the book was in the hands of reviewers, but not yet out, I got a call one evening in South Hadley—by then I was teaching at Mount Holyoke College. A gravelly voice said, 'This is Mel Moss and I'm writing a review of your book.' Momentarily, I thought it was a friend playing a practical joke, but luckily I didn't mock the caller. He

1. William S. McFeely, *Grant: A Biography* (New York: Norton, 1981), 171, 173.

said that somewhere I had a line about Grant's 'throw away lines; throw away life.' He had lost the page that contained it. Could I get the page for him? I gulped and said it might take a day or two for me to find it. He said he needed it now; he went to press at midnight. I told him I'd try to find it, and call him back. I didn't have a clue as to where it was; I immediately called my daughter, Jennifer, who had done proofreading for me, and desperately asked her where the line was. About a half an hour later she called; it's on page 78. I called Moss and he set the paragraph in a box in the midst of a favorable review. He bought the idea that rather than some over-blown assessment of genius, my simplistic analysis of Grant's true ability made sense.

Lest I get too carried away with myself, let me hastily say that, much later, in a more prestigious journal, a reviewer who disliked the book cited this same passage as demonstrating how demeaning I was about Grant as a general. So, let me read the passage and you can decide for yourself. The Civil War had begun in April 1861 and Grant, a West Point graduate, volunteered to train recruits. After a discouraging series of unsuccessful civilian jobs, and rumors of his drinking, he was having trouble getting his army commission restored. In June, it finally came through; Colonel Grant's confidence was restored and that confidence held through four years of the war. It was at this point that I made my assessment.

Ulysses Grant in his throw-away lines—in his throw-away life—kept trying to get people to see the colossal sick joke. All you do is take the nicest guy on the block—the one who will not be diverted by dreams of vainglory or revenge or by the nonsense of masochism—and knowing he is not good for much else, let him act on the bald fact that war means killing the guy on the other side, or at least scaring him badly enough so that he will quit fighting. Then, all this man has to do is keep the fact in mind all the way to Appomattox.² But the most important part of the student's knowledge was something he carried with him as an almost private joke. He had learned—or had always known—how simple war is. It may have dawned on him as he dozed while sitting erectly at a lecture at West

2. McFeely, *Grant*, 78.

Point, or during the more intense seminar of a Mexican War battle, or at almost any other time. When he learned it does not matter. He knew it. The truth underlying it was uncongenial to American ears and Grant was too kind and gentle a man ever to come out with it directly. But his whole life was focused on the mastery of the fact and his *Memoirs* was its record: war is an act; to make war is to kill.

I fought the Civil War and then was faced with how to handle Appomattox. The famous scene of General Robert E. Lee and General Ulysses Grant meeting to end the war certainly had to be told, but how did I avoid having the tail wag the dog? I am not a historian who subscribes to the view that when those two white gentlemen shook hands they had ended the brothers' war and pointed the way to the reconciliation of North and South. There were four million black Americans in the way of that interpretation.

What's more, the Appomattox scene is such a famous one that it would tend to make the rest of the Grant story an anticlimax. There were still eight years in the White House and fourteen years beyond that, if I were to tell the story of his whole life. As I say, I didn't duck it, but I did not even allow it to be the closing passages of a chapter. And, I kept my focus on Grant and personal details.

When Porter went to check on Grant at four in the morning, the room was empty, and going outside, he found Grant pacing back and forth, his hands pressed against his head. His migraine was excruciating, and Porter and Rawlins got him some coffee. When the throbbing abated a bit, he wrote Lee, 'I have no authority to treat on the subject of peace; the meeting proposed for 10 A.M. today could lead to no good.' [Lee had agreed to make peace, without surrender, which would have meant recognizing the Confederacy.] He did add a plea for battlefield surrender without any talk of the general political situation: 'I will state, however, general, that I am equally anxious for peace without yourself, and the whole North entertains the same feeling. . . .' In all, the message that went out early in the morning had a decidedly urgent tone. Grant told Horace Porter that morning at the start of the greatest day of his life, that the best thing that could happen to him that day would be for the pain of the headache to clear. It was torturing him, but he turned down an ambulance, mounted Cincinnati and

rode off. . . . Lee had ridden to the point on the Richmond road where he had expected to meet Grant at ten, only to receive Grant's note saying he was not coming. With his military position worsening by the hour, Lee could no longer continue the grim comedy of manners. The time was gone for playing for terms that did not involve an admission of defeat and with great sadness, he agreed to surrender. . . . When the message reached Union lines, Meade . . . ordered a truce. Lieutenant Charles Pease, sent to find Grant, had to do considerable hunting. An hour and a half after Lee wrote the crucial note, Pease came upon Grant and Rawlins who were off their horses, lighting cigars. Pease galloped up, and Rawlins opened the envelope, and read the message, and handed it to Grant, who read it with no noticeable emotion. He then sat down on the grass and wrote his reply to Lee. . . . He sent Babcock galloping off with the letter from Lee, mounted Cincinnati, and rode toward Appomattox Court House at a trot. His headache was gone. He had worn down Lee's great armies and defeated the great patriarch in war and now he managed to beat him in the gentlemanly art of war-ending. From the moment Lee's note arrived, Grant was in perfect command of himself, and from then on every move of the day was a quiet triumph played out with consummate skill.³

This past academic year, I have had the great fortune to be a fellow of the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. I was a part of a cluster of four historians who were investigating the relationship of biography to history. I was the only one guilty of three biographies and other books with a heavy biographical component. We had as our guests several eminent biographers who gave us the benefit of their take on the craft. Kenneth Silverman, the distinguished author who has written biographies of Cotton Mather and Houdini, and is working on John Cage at the moment—how's that for diversity?—said that his only requirement is that the subject that draws him must have left a copious paper trail, letters, diary, etc. On the other hand, the literary scholar Stephen Greenblatt, working with almost nothing in the way of direct documentation on Shakespeare's life, but with a masterful command of the world of

3. McFeely, *Grant*, 217-218.

London in the late sixteenth century, wrote his wonderful *Will of the World*. Linda Gordon, who is writing a biography of the Farm Security Administration photographer Dorothea Lange, told us about having to master a new art form—photography—to add to her command of the social history of the Great Depression, to make the story of Lange whole.

In all, it was a wonderfully stimulating exploration of biography. Throughout our discussions, there was the assumption that good biography demands strong writing. We never articulated the fact, but I think we should have. Achieving the level of literature does not flow simply from familiarity with a keyboard. The words have to be carefully crafted. This evening, not I hope, claiming too much for my own work, I would like to share with you a bit about how a biography is shaped stylistically. For example, as I was working on *Frederick Douglass* I was conscious of how bodies of water played an important part in his story—ruminations about freedom when seeing the white sails of boats on the Chesapeake Bay, sailing to Nantucket to deliver his first great public abolitionist lecture, his trip across the Atlantic to address abolitionist audiences. Slowly, I reached a metaphor that would work. I had the job not to treat the biography like a bronze monument to a too-noble hero, so I began the book with a passage that I thought brought Douglass down to human size and yet hinted at the struggle he would have with slavery.

The Tuckahoe is a quiet creek. Frederick Douglass, when he was a child, lived on its low banks. When he was a man, he walked boldly and talked clearly in a world noisy with hatred, but the country he first knew was tranquil. The Eastern Shore, the long peninsula that puts its back to the Atlantic and faces the great, broad Chesapeake Bay, is gentle. Wrested ruthlessly from the Indians in the seventeenth century, it had long been cleared and farmed when Frederick was born in February 1818. Streams shaded with trees, divided the fields and flowed to join slow, meandering rivers that, in turn, met tidal waters reaching deep into easy terrain. Frederick's first home was a solitary cabin in the woods bordering a brook that separated the farther fields of two farms

owned by the man who owned him. But the boy knew nothing of being owned as he sunk his toes in the clay bottoms of the shallow pool over which skater bugs glided.⁴

On the other hand, if someone else has done the job for you, the historian has the license to use quotation marks. Here is how I end the biography. Douglass had driven in to Washington from his lovely Anacostia house to attend a women's rights meeting and had come home to tell his wife about it. Mimicking some speaker, something he was good at, he began to kneel on one knee—and dropped dead.

Telegrams of condolence were delivered to Cedar Hill in batches; from John W. Hutchinson, a voice from the first great trip to Ireland, 'I wish to sing at the funeral.' From the former South Carolina congressman Robert Smalls, 'The greatest of the race has fallen.' The feisty radical Henry O. Waggoner—a friend for better than half a century—telegraphed from Denver, 'Can I get there in time takes four days.'

...

Later a heroic statue was placed near the site of his Rochester house; it is one of the finest of hundreds of memorials to Douglas. But perhaps his best monument lies quietly in the diary of another of the titans of the nineteenth century, one with whom Douglass had done ferocious battle. On February 21, Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote, 'Taking up the papers to-day, the first word that caught my eye thrilled my very soul. Frederick Douglass is dead! What memories of the long years since he and I first met chased each other, thick and fast, through my mind and held me spellbound.' She recalled his 'burning eloquence' before a Boston anti-slavery meeting when 'with wit, satire, and indignation he graphically described the bitterness of slavery and the humiliation of subjection to those who, in all human virtues and powers, were inferior to himself.' It was the first time she had seen Douglass: 'Around him sat the great antislavery orators of the day, earnestly watching he effect of his eloquence on that immense audience, that laughed and wept by turns, completely carried away by the wondrous gifts

4. William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (W. W. Norton: 1991), 3.

of his pathos and humor,' For Stanton, 'all the other speakers seemed tame after Frederick Douglass.' He stood there like an African prince, majestic in his wrath.⁵

As you see, I think how a book ends and begins matters. Grant's death from cancer, a preoccupation of the America of 1885, required a full telling and I gave him a fairly standard deathbed scene. Then I added: 'Now the silence was absolute.' If the reader came to the book with any preconception of Grant it would likely have been that he was either a drunk or a butcher general and certainly not much of a talker, not much of a maker of noise. Why then was I suggesting that silence should be the appropriate way to close his story? The answer lay in, of all places, in the English city of Newcastle-on-Tyne. Grant was on his long trip around the world. The quiet, deadly warrior had won the applause of great crowds once the Civil War was over, and on his trip to Europe, Africa, and India and the Far East, he was greeted by great dignitaries. But nothing matched the noise of the cheers at Newcastle. And so I decided to open my book this way.

Ulysses Grant loved the sound of a crowd. The strangely silent hero heard its roar perhaps more often than any other American and in places all around the world. Once, on September 22, 1877, in Newcastle, in the north of England, some eighty thousand working people crowded special trains, jammed the railroad station, and pressed through the streets and onto the town moor to become part of a great parade in honor of the American. Miners from the collieries with pictures of pit boys on their banners, tailors with pictures of Adam and Eve on theirs, metalworkers from the shipyards, carpenters, masons 'massive in physique, strong in numbers, and walking solidly and steadily four abreast like trained soldiers,' sawyers, and tanners marched past the visiting general. The painters carried a 'picture representing the breaking of the chains of slavery, with the inscription, "Welcome to the Liberator" . . . adorned with bunches of fresh, green fern.' The people came to welcome one of their own. In their England democracy

5. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, 382.

had not yet been perfected, but here among them was a man who looked like them and who had left the stink of a tannery to lead the hosts of secular righteousness against the holders of slaves. First as general and then as president, Grant had been at the head of a nation they imagined to be a beacon of goodness ready to call in all who sought to live in freedom.

At last Ulysses Grant was loved as he needed to be loved. . . .

These were indeed his people. He was one of them. But Grant had fooled them all. He had been denying them—denying himself—all his life. He believed that if he did not make that denial, he would be nothing but an anonymous failure lost in some similar American crowd. Instead of remaining with them, he had forced himself out of the world of ordinary people by the most murderous acts of will and had doomed himself to spend the rest of his life looking for approval for having done so. It was not that Ulysses Grant did not like other ordinary people. On the contrary he was always entirely comfortable with them, whether among the crowds in Newcastle or in an army camp. He had the remarkably rare gift of being able to talk to any other man who happened to be sitting on a log along a wartime road. The problem was that he did not trust himself of remaining in conversation with the man whose language he could speak. He did not dare embrace the comradeship of those marchers, those producers, those people, because he was afraid they would march off and leave him behind. So he had to push past them all, and when he had gone by them, he was very lonely.⁶

And so, as I've said, with no more cheers, it seemed right to finish the book: 'Now the silence was absolute.'

Well, that is enough about Grant. I'd be delighted to take your questions and comments.

6. McFeely, *Grant*, 1-2.

Copyright of Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society is the property of American Antiquarian Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.