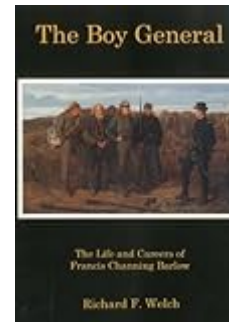


Richard F. Welch. *The Boy General: The Life and Careers of Francis Channing Barlow.* Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003. 301 pp. \$49.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8386-3957-3.



Reviewed by Gregory J. Dehler (Department of History, Front Range Community College)

Published on H-CivWar (March, 2006)

Brahmin on the Battlefield

Francis Channing Barlow was one of the better Union division-level commanders in the eastern theater of the American Civil War. Ulysses S. Grant thought so highly of him, that, after Appomattox, he offered Barlow command of the Twenty-Fifth Corps on the border of Mexico. Barlow's division served as the spearhead of the Second Corps, and hence the Army of the Potomac, during Grant's overland campaign of 1864. As such, Barlow's troops were in the thick of the heavy fighting at the Wilderness, the Bloody Angle, Cold Harbor, the James crossing, Jerusalem Plank Road, Deep Bottom, and Petersburg. Barlow's success, Richard F. Welch informs us, stemmed from his relentless training of his men, stern discipline, and tenacious execution of orders, even ones that seemed suicidal. Known for his courage, Barlow was wounded several times during the war. At Gettysburg his survival seemed highly unlikely. Nonetheless, he had an almost self-destructive belief that he would not be killed during the war.

Before Richard F. Welch's *The Boy General*, there was no biography of Barlow. Like many of the Union divisional commanders, Barlow has been a largely forgotten

figure, lost among the more famous generals in the pantheon of Civil War heroes. His historical place has been confined to campaign and unit histories. Welch successfully rescues Barlow from historical obscurity, dividing his 260-page biography into ten chapters, two of which are devoted to Barlow's life before and after the war, and a third to historiography. The remaining seven chapters cover the war years, with four focused on 1864 and 1865. The writing is clear and concise. There is never any doubt where Barlow and his unit were on the battlefield. The bulk of Welch's primary source material comes from the *Official Records* and the modest collection of wartime letters in the Francis Channing Barlow papers at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

General Grant's overland campaign of 1864 and 1865 was the crowning accomplishment of Barlow's service, but had held commands before that. After the Confederates fired on Fort Sumter, Barlow enlisted as a private in New York City, where he practiced law before the war, because he possessed no practical military experience. But he soon came to believe that his social rank as a scion of one of New England's educated cultural elite

families deserved recognition and so he accepted a commission as a lieutenant. Ninety days of inactivity later, his three-month enlistment term expired and he was discharged. After spending several months as a civilian in New York City, he returned to service late in 1861 as a lieutenant colonel. At twenty-five, the Harvard graduate led a coup against his colonel and received the command of the Sixty-first New York regiment for himself.

Barlow led his men into the field during the ill-fated Peninsula Campaign of 1862, first seeing combat at Fair Oaks. His regiment also participated at Glendale and Malvern Hill, where the Confederates bludgeoned his exhausted and famished men. Like Union commanding officers, especially Phil Kearney, Barlow became embittered and deeply critical of General George McClellan. Barlow next saw fighting at Antietam where he was wounded. While convalescing he actively sought a generalship and encouraged his politically well-connected friends to lobby on his behalf. He also floated, neither for the first nor the last time, an interest in commanding black troops. Robert Gould Shaw, whom Barlow had tutored at Harvard, first suggested the idea. Although Barlow frequently flirted with the idea of commanding black troops, he never did.

After he recovered from the wound he suffered at Antietam, Barlow was promoted to brigadier general of volunteers and received command of a division in the Eleventh Corps, which was made up of large number of ethnic German volunteers. Like many in the Army of the Potomac, Barlow had grave doubts about the ability of the German troops, and he mercilessly criticized them. At Chancellorsville, his unit was detached from the main body of his corps and hardly saw combat. The complete collapse of the rest of the corps on the right flank at the hands of Confederate General Stonewall Jackson convinced Barlow that his assessment of the German troops was correct. The Eleventh Corps's experience at Gettysburg further solidified his thinking. Seriously wounded early in the fighting, Barlow saw combat only for the first couple of hours of the battle. A myth emerged after the war that General John Gordon visited the mortally wounded Barlow and read him letters from his wife. It was a great story for postwar reconciliation, but Welch doubts that it really happened. While many Confederate officers, including Gordon, visited Barlow, he became something of a curiosity, especially after the doctors in gray announced he would not survive; the story of the letter reading was, at best, an embellishment. General Winfield Scott Hancock denied Barlow's wife, Arabella, permission to cross the lines, fearing she might betray

information of military value to the enemy, but the lady felt compelled to see her stricken husband and crossed the pickets anyhow. Miraculously Barlow survived his wound. As he recuperated, the Eleventh Corps and his division were shipped west. At the request of Winfield Scott Hancock, Barlow received a divisional command in the Second Corps in early 1864.

Welch is critical of Grant's overland campaign and Barlow would have concurred with his biographer's conclusion. Day after day he saw men killed to no avail. There was almost no preparation before men were ordered into battle with a poor understanding of the enemy's positions. Insufficient ammunition compounded unclear orders, and troops easily got lost due to their ill-informed scouts and guides. To Barlow it was a maddening way to run an army. On several occasions, his division was left in the open as bait to draw in the Confederates; on others, Grant ordered suicidal attacks. Massive casualties and the infusion of raw recruits to replace battle-hardened veterans blunted the effectiveness of Barlow's division. His frustrations were magnified by a dispute with his corps commander, General Hancock, in the summer of 1864. Hampered by frayed nerves and bone-numbing fatigue, the two men sought a scapegoat for Barlow's failure to arrive at Petersburg in a timely fashion. The division had taken a wrong turn during a nighttime march. Hancock was incensed because he had caught Barlow napping earlier in the day. Barlow, for his part, blamed Hancock's staff. The controversy fizzled out when Grant vetoed an investigation proposed by General George Meade, but not before ruffling feathers in the leadership of the Second Corps.

Barlow's summer worsened when he received word that his wife had died. During the war she served as a nurse and the devoted couple arranged to spend time together during the campaigns. Strained, exhausted, and exposed to illness while caring for wounded troops during the overland campaign, Arabella's health collapsed. At Barlow's direction, she returned to Washington to recuperate, but she never recovered. Arabella died on July 27, 1864 of typhus. After he returned to duty following his bereavement leave, Hancock tried the Boy General at commanding two divisions (most likely a test for future corps command), but Barlow's mind was not clear and the campaign was a poor demonstration of his leadership abilities, Welch believes. In August, Barlow, prostrated by dysentery, checked himself into the hospital, where he remained until April 1865. He was on the field during Appomattox, but Grant did not invite Barlow or any other divisional commanders from the Second or Sixth

Corps who bore the brunt of the fighting in the last year, to the surrender ceremony. Welch interprets this as a snub, which surely must have made Barlow indignant.

One does get an excellent sense of Barlow's personality from Welch's biography. Barlow believed he belonged to a privileged class, the natural elites of society. He possessed complete and unquestioning self-confidence and disregard for the feelings or thoughts of others. As a general, he was cold and aloof from his men and had almost no relationship with them as individuals or as a body. He simply felt he was above them. Although he did not have a wealthy upbringing, he belonged to the New England intelligentsia, which he and his contemporaries valued more than wealth. After his insane father left the family, his mother, the charming and attractive Almira Barlow, made sure that Francis had all of the connections he required to further himself in life. This circle of well-placed friends, including Ralph Waldo Emerson and Nathaniel

Hawthorne, watched Barlow as a boy, facilitated his entry into Harvard, and then to New York City, where he practiced law before the war. His connections served him well during the war. This upbringing had the effect of convincing Barlow that he had angels who watched over him, and that his status and friends would protect him.

Grant wanted Barlow to remain in the army after the war, but he declined. After such exciting wartime service, postwar campaigns against Native Americans on the Plains held no charm for him. Instead, Barlow returned to his legal practice and, like so many of his cohorts, entered politics. He served in several state offices in New York, including attorney general and secretary of state, where he gained a reputation for prosecuting political corruption. He died at the age of sixty-one in 1896. Although Barlow was not a major figure during the war, anyone interested in Grant's overland campaign of 1864 will want to consult *The Boy General*.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

Citation: Gregory J. Dehler. Review of Welch, Richard F., *The Boy General: The Life and Careers of Francis Channing Barlow*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. March, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11533>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.