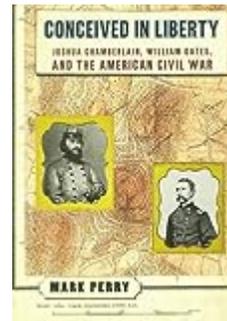


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mark Perry. *Conceived in Liberty: Joshua Chamberlain, William Oates, and the American Civil War.* New York: Viking, 1997. x + 500 pp. \$31.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-670-86225-2.



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In *Conceived in Liberty*, Mark Perry chronicles the lives of the two men whose fierce struggle on Little Round Top on July 2, 1863, was among the most dramatic episodes of the most famous battle of the Civil War. Perry's objective is not, however, merely to describe Joshua Chamberlain's and William Oates's lives. He also looks to place their experiences in the context of broader developments in American life during the nineteenth century, from the women's rights movement of the antebellum era to the Populist uprising of the 1890s. Unfortunately, the end result of Perry's efforts is a flawed and frustrating book that falls short of realizing its full potential.

It must first be noted that Perry has produced a readable and informative study of Chamberlain, the college professor who won fame on the battlefields of the Civil War and subsequently served four terms as Maine's governor, and Oates, the Alabama lawyer of humble origins whose own wartime heroics catapulted him to prominence and a highly successful political career. Perry's prose is clear and workmanlike, his research in primary sources is certainly respectable, and he has two good stories to tell. The campaign narratives are particularly well done, and his chronicle of Oates's life, which has not received anywhere near the attention given to Chamberlain's, is a welcome contribution to Civil War literature.

The Chamberlain who emerges from the pages of this book is not a "marble man," but a complex individual whose service to the Union was indeed worthy of high praise, but who was also insensitive to his wife and unsympathetic to the plight of his constituents as governor of Maine and to his students at Bowdoin. Oates is presented as the archetypal white southerner, dedicated to the values of the Democratic party and its ascendancy, proud of his service to the Confederate cause, and unrepentant about that cause.

Unfortunately, the book is plagued with sloppy factual errors. It is not accurate to say that "defense of a pro-slavery constitution in Kansas" cost Franklin Pierce his presidency (p. 88); James Longstreet did not have a "habit" of wearing a carpet slipper into battle (p. 113); Union gunboats did not operate on the Chickahominy River during the Seven Days' battles (p. 137); John Pope did not bring "groans of despair to everyone...when Lincoln first brought him east" in the summer of 1862 (p. 144); and Ambrose Burnside commanded the Ninth Corps in the 1864 Overland Campaign, not the Twentieth (p. 256). The book has a nice section of photos, but Oliver O. Howard is conspicuously misidentified as George Thomas. And, although the maps are generally quite good, the position of "Stonewall" Jackson's command at Fredericksburg is inaccurately depicted in the

map of that battle. This is by no means a comprehensive list of Perry's slips.

Of course, to err *is* human, and a minor slip here or there is not necessarily fatal to a book. But there are so many in *Conceived in Liberty* that the author's status as an authority on nineteenth-century America is severely damaged. Thus when he makes assertions that challenge findings of recent scholarship and/or are not firmly supported by the sources (and there are several), the ability of the reader to accept his arguments is seriously diminished. For example, Perry makes a vigorous effort to link difficulties in Chamberlain's marriage to the women's movement of the Middle Period and its questioning of the place of women in society (in the process of which he asserts that "the Civil War inaugurated the process leading to women's suffrage" [p. 179]—evidently unaware of the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention). Yet the portrayal of Fannie Chamberlain as a woman who craved independence from the enslavement of marriage in *Conceived in Liberty* is not the one presented in Alice R. Trulock's and Williard Wallace's studies of Chamberlain. Perry's thesis on this subject is certainly an intriguing one, and may even be correct. But because there are so many errors elsewhere in the book, it is more likely than not that readers familiar with Trulock's and Wallace's studies will accept their arguments rather than Perry's.

It is also disappointing, considering it is Perry's ambition is to examine the forces that shaped the republic and Chamberlain's and Oates's world views, that he takes no notice of the impact of the market revolution on political, cultural, religious, and economic life in the nation. Given that Chamberlain's roots were in a bourgeois, market-oriented society in Maine, while Oates's were in a society of subsistence farmers in southeastern Alabama, taking the time to place their respective political and cultural outlooks in this context might have yielded significant insights. Alas, Perry passes up the opportunity.

Given the high profile of the publisher and the nation's persistent fascination with Gettysburg, it is not unlikely that this book will reach a large audience. And, for all its flaws, this is a book that will satisfy readers looking for a clear and entertaining account of the lives of these two men. However, readers looking for something more will find *Conceived in Liberty* a disappointing work that falls considerably short of being the contribution to scholarship it could well have been.

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