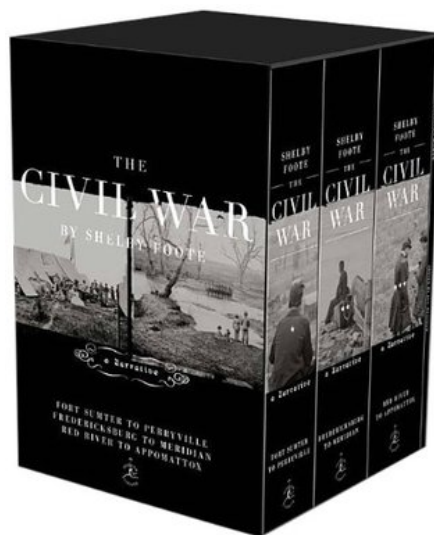




The Civil War Trilogy with American Homer: Reflections on Shelby Foote

Shelby Foote , Jon Meacham

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Selected by the Modern Library as one of the 100 best nonfiction books of all time

On the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, the Modern Library publishes Shelby Foote's three-volume masterpiece in a new boxed set including three hardcovers and a new trade paperback, *American Homer: Reflections on Shelby Foote and His Classic Civil War: A Narrative*, edited by and with an introduction from Pulitzer Prize winner Jon Meacham and including essays by Michael Beschloss, Ken Burns, Annette Gordon-Reed, and others.

Random House publisher Bennett Cerf commissioned southern novelist Shelby Foote to write a short, one-volume history of the American Civil War. Thirty years and a million and a half words later—every word having been written out longhand with nib pens dipped into ink—Foote published the third and final volume of what has become the classic narrative of that epic war.

As he approached the end of the final volume, Foote recounted this scene in a letter to his friend, the novelist Walker Percy: "I killed Lincoln last week—Saturday, at noon. While I was doing it (he had his chest arched up, holding his last breath to let it out) some halfassed doctor came to the door with vols I and II under his arm, wanting me to autograph them for his son for Xmas. I was in such a state of shock, I not only let him in; I even signed the goddam books, a thing I seldom do. Then I turned back and killed him and had Stanton say, 'Now he belongs to the ages.' A strange feeling, though. I have another 70-odd pages to go, and I have a fear they'll be like Hamlet with Hamlet left out. Christ, what a man. It's been a great thing getting to know him as he was, rather than as he has come to be—a sort of TV image of himself, with a ghost alongside."

When Percy read the final book, he wrote to Foote: "It's a noble work. I'm still staggered by the size of the achievement. . . . It is *The Iliad*."

A selection of these letters, along with essays by Jon Meacham, Michael Beschloss, Ken Burns, Annette Gordon-Reed, Michael Eric Dyson, Julia Reed, Robert Loomis, Donald Graham, John M. McCardell, Jr., and Jay Tolson, are included in *American Homer*, the bonus paperback book available only in the Modern Library boxed set of *The Civil War*.

Shelby Foote's tremendous, sweeping narrative of the most fascinating conflict in our history—a war that lasted four long, bitter years, an experience more profound and meaningful than any other the American people have ever lived through—begins with Jefferson Davis's resignation from the United States Senate and Abraham Lincoln's departure from Springfield for the national capital. It is these two leaders, whose lives continually touch on the great chain of events throughout the story, who are only the first of scores of exciting personalities that in effect make *The Civil War* a multiple biography set against the crisis of an age.

Four years later, Lincoln's second inaugural sets the seal, invoking "charity for all" on the Eve of Five Forks and the Grant-Lee race for Appomattox. Here is the dust and stench of war, a sort of Twilight of the Gods. The epilogue is Lincoln in his grave, and Davis in his postwar existence—"Lucifer in Starlight." So ends a unique achievement—already recognized as one of the finest histories ever fashioned by an American—a narrative that re-creates on a vast and brilliant canvas the events and personalities of an American epic: the Civil War.

The Civil War Trilogy with American Homer: Reflections on Shelby Foote Details

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From Reader Review The Civil War Trilogy with American Homer: Reflections on Shelby Foote for online ebook

Ryan Holiday says

Having read and enjoyed Shelby Foote's novel *Shiloh* (which I highly recommend), I was motivated to attempt his magnum opus, the one million-plus word trilogy *The Civil War*. The books are surprisingly readable, come in a bright box set and are great for flipping through. If you have any background with the Civil War, I suggest reading the introduction and then skipping around and reading about the battles or figures you're interested in. For me, that included William T. Sherman, Nathan Bedford Forrest, Jefferson Davis, Vicksburg and a few others. Foote is the master of the anecdote so these books make for great conversational resources and are quite memorable.

I cannot recommend this trilogy, however, without a nod to the greatest definitive history set: Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. In college I convinced my parents I needed the books (which I could not afford) for a class even though I didn't. Since then, I have returned to them often. I have a fond memory of sitting in Los Angeles' art deco Union Station while reading Volume 1, utterly lost in the world of ancient Rome. Gibbon's vivid descriptions of the contests in the coliseum, prefaced first by the idyllic rule of Antoninus and Aurelius, outshine anything put forth by the contemporary writers of Rome who actually lived it. I can't stress how strongly your bookshelf deserves this set.

Matt says

"In time, even death itself might be abolished; who knows but it may be given to us after this life to meet again in the old quarters, to play chess and draughts, to get up soon to answer the morning roll call, to fall in at the tap of the drum for drill and dress parade, and again to hastily don our war gear while the monotonous patter of the long roll summons to battle. Who knows but again the old flags, ragged and torn, snapping in the wind, may face each other and flutter, pursuing and pursued, while the cries of victory fill a summer day? And after the battle, then the slain and wounded will arise, and all will meet together under the two flags, all sound and well, and there will be talking and laughter and cheers, and all will say, Did it not seem real? Was it not as in the old days?"

- Private Barry Benson, Army of Northern Virginia (1880), quoted by Shelby Foote at the conclusion of Ken Burns' *The Civil War*

It's hard to know where to start when discussing Shelby Foote's three-volume *The Civil War: A Narrative*. When he began working on the project, he was a novelist of some acclaim, though not widely known. When he finished, he had created a literary Rushmore, not just a book (or rather three books) but a veritable monument. It brought Foote fame and fortune unusual for an authority on the Civil War. He may be dead, but because of this achievement, his name lives on forevermore.

I first read *The Civil War: A Narrative* while in high school (which should tell you all you need to know about my popularity). When I finished the last page, my initial response was one of accomplishment. This is a hefty series, after all. In the paperback versions I have, the first book (*Fort Sumter to Perryville*) comprises 810 pages of text, the second (*Fredericksburg to Meridian*) 966, and the third (*Red River to Appomattox*) 1060, for a grand total of 2,836 pages (not including the acknowledgments, bibliographies, and indexes). In a very real sense, finishing Foote's trilogy marked the beginning of my serious adult reading.

Over the last several years, I have been making my way through them again. Not in a concerted way, but at my leisure. A chapter here. A chapter there. The first time around, I was young and just wanted to finish. The second, I took my time and enjoyed the journey. Since my first read-through ended in '98, in the era of AOL disks and dial up, I never had reason to put down any thoughts. This go-round, I decided a review was in order, though most things that can be said about Foote and his opus have already been written.

First and foremost, *The Civil War: A Narrative* is a masterpiece of storytelling. Because Foote wrote fiction, it's tempting to call this novelistic, but that's far too reductive. Parts of it read like a novel, it is true. Other parts, though, read like Homer or the Bible. The Civil War is the seminal event in American history. In terms of both drama and importance, it is second to none. Shelby Foote manages to capture that sense, while also bringing these past events to vivid life.

Foote's descriptions can't be beat. There are no pictorial inserts in my editions, but I hardly needed them. Foote paints with his words. Just four pages in, for example, is this image of Jefferson Davis poised to resign the Senate:

He was dressed in neat black broadcloth, cuffless trouser-legs crumpling over his boots, the coat full-skirted with wide lapels, a satin waistcoat framing the stiff white bosom of his shirt, a black silk handkerchief wound stockwise twice around the upturned collar and knotted loosely at the throat. Close-shaven except for the tuft of beard at the jut of the chin, the face was built economically close to the skull, and more than anything it expressed an iron control by the brain within that skull. He had been sick for the past month and he looked it. He looked in fact like a man who had emerged from a long bout with a fever; which was what he was, except that the fever had been a generation back, when he was twenty-seven, and now he was fifty-two. Beneath the high square forehead, etched with the fine crisscross lines of pain and overwork, the eyes were deep-set, gray and stern, large and lustrous, though one was partly covered by a film, a result of the neuralgia which had racked him all those years. The nose was aquiline, finely shaped, the nostrils broad and delicately chiseled. The cheeks were deeply hollowed beneath the too-high cheekbones and above the wide, determined jaw.

Foote accomplishes a great deal with his portraits. He is not just giving us a picture, but a characterization. You get to know the war's major players on very intimate terms.

The battle scenes are memorable because they are told from the participants' viewpoints. Take, for instance, Foote's telling of the climax of Pickett's Charge, as Lewis Armistead reaches the Angle:

[Armistead] saw...that it would not do to lose momentum or allow the Federals time to bring up reinforcements. "Come on, boys! Give them cold steel!" he cried, and holding his saber high, still with the black hat balanced on its tip for a guidon, he stepped over the wall, yelling as he did so...Young [Lieutenant Alonzo] Cushing's two guns were just ahead, unserved and silent because Cushing himself was dead by now, shot through the mouth as he called for a faster rate of fire, and [General John] Gibbon had been taken rearward, a bullet in his shoulder. Then Armistead fell too, killed as he reached with his free hand for the muzzle of one of the guns, and the clot of perhaps 300 men who had followed him over the wall was struck from the right front by the two regiments [Colonel Arthur] Devereux had brought down "pretty damn quick" from the uphill slope beyond the clump of trees. The fight was hand to hand along the fringes, while others among the defenders stood back...and fired into the close-packed, heaving mass of rebel troops and colors...Even [General Henry] Hunt was there, on horseback,

emptying his revolver into the crush. “See ‘em! See ‘em!” he cried as he pulled the trigger. Then his horse went down, hoofs flailing, with the general underneath. Men on both sides were hollering as they milled about and fired, some cursing, others praying, and this, combined with the screams of the wounded and the moans of the dying produced an effect which one who heard it called “strange and terrible, a sound that came from thousands of human throats, yet was not a commingling of shouts and yells but rather like a vast mournful roar.”

With nearly 3,000 pages with which to work, Foote could afford to be comprehensive – and he is. The Civil War took place in thousands of locations, and to his credit, Foote tries to hit most of them. Though he obviously prioritizes in terms of importance, he does not neglect any theater. Thus, you get a chronicle of the entirety of Grant’s Vicksburg campaign, with all its false starts, along with lesser known fights such as battle of Valverde in Arizona, and Glorietta Pass in New Mexico. While Foote does his best to touch on all the military concerns, the social and political aspects of the war go largely unremarked upon. When Foote does venture into that territory, he mostly blunders. For example, his treatment of Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation borders on the ignorant.

It must be noted that *The Civil War: A Narrative* is not an academic history. There are no endnotes or citations. If you want to know where Foote found a particular piece of evidence, you are straight out of luck. Foote had his reasons, and it’s too late to argue with him. In general, I can accept that as a narrative historian, he is not interested in weighing evidence or parsing sources. His chief purpose is a coherent story, meaning choosing a version of the truth from the mass of contradictory documents that are the War’s primary sources. However, it is worth noting the downside to this approach. Foote seems to follow the old rule that when the “truth becomes legend, print the legend.” He loves a good anecdote, and he never shows much concern for corroboration; there are things printed here that sound too good to be true because they aren’t true. One striking example of Foote’s lack of source scrutiny comes from his gleeful retelling of Ulysses Grant’s alleged “Yazoo bender,” an incident often used (by Grant’s detractors) to reduce him to a bumbling alcoholic. Most serious historians discredit this story, since it comes from a single source who was not present, and who did not make a record of it until 1897. Here, though, the tale is related as gospel.

The mythologizing, though, is part of the charm of these books. If you want the hardcore research, the diligent analysis, and the careful parsing of evidence, there are plenty of other places to turn.

The Civil War: A Narrative is just about as good as history writing gets. Upon my reread, though, I did have one nagging concern, that of tone. I hesitate to mention it, since this is such an overwhelmingly praised body of work, but I don’t think I can ignore it.

Ken Burns helped make Foote into an honest-to-god celebrity. People who might not have read 3,000 pages on the Civil War were suddenly more than willing to crack those covers. As Foote’s fame increased, more and more people came to see Foote as such kind of oracle. They journeyed to study at what Tony Horwitz called “the Foote of the Master.” During this period of fame, Foote let loose with a lot of opinions, some of them a bit troubling. I’ll spare you the list, and skip to one representative example.

Shelby Foote once said, with a microphone in his face: “Believe me, no soldier on either side gave a damn about the slaves.”

That statement is breathtakingly arrogant and unthinking. *No soldier on either side? Really? There were 200,000 black troops who fought for the Union!* Know what was on their damn mind? Slavery, and freedom, which they were willing to take at the tip of a bayonet.

I think this quote really captures Foote’s mindset. He is not a true Lost Causer in the sense that he denigrated

the (white) Union soldiers at the expense of the Confederacy. In fact, he goes to pains relate the bravery of those Union troops, whether it's the suicidal charges up Marye's Heights at Fredericksburg, or Hancock the Superb's glorious hour at Gettysburg. He has also named Lincoln one of the two geniuses of the war (the other, naturally, being Robert E. Lee).

No, despite many Lost Cause shadings, the true tone of *The Civil War: A Narrative* is of white reconciliation. At the end of Burns' *The Civil War*, Foote is given the valedictory, which he uses to quote the Benson letter I excerpted above. While he speaks, we are shown images of old white men in blue and gray, shaking hands and making amends. This is the post-Reconstruction moment where white America decided the war had been a contest of moral equals. *You were brave and I was brave; I was brave and you were brave. Now we can all get along.* This is the reason Gettysburg is a national gathering place and a popular tourist destination, rather than a national scar.

To be sure, the theme of white reconciliation played a role in binding the nation in the immediate decades following the end of hostilities. At the expense of black Americans, the country more or less endured. Today, though, the continuing distortion of the War's historiography is disheartening.

I don't mean to lay all or even most of the blame at Foote's feet. However, his work has become immortal, and so it has great influence. W.J. Cash observed that no one wants to believe their heroes fought and died for something "so crass and unbeautiful as the preservation of slavery." When you read Foote, you can continue that maintain that illusion.

The Civil War: A Narrative is almost exclusively about the battles, the men who fought them, and the courage that took. Far be it from me to criticize anyone who wants to read about Civil War battles. I do it all the time, and will continue to do so. But it's worth pondering, 150 years later, what's actually important still today. Is it the genius of Lee's army chomping Pope at Second Bull Run? Is it Jackson's smashing of Howard's flank at Chancellorsville? Is it Sherman's masterful March to the Sea? Is it Grant's ruthless and relentless Overland Campaign?

Or is it something more, and something far more complicated?

John says

May 3, 2011

3 volumes, 1000 pages each; this is going to take a while. But I've just finished Volume 1 - Fort Sumpter to Perryville and -- since at this rate I won't finish the whole thing for another year -- I thought I'd make some initial notes. Basically -- this is glorious. I'm not a Civil War buff, and I'm certainly not interested in getting down into the weeds of whether Foote gets this or that detail exactly right, or is fair or unfair to this or that general. The things that impress here are (1) the sheer scope of the enterprise, and (2) the fact that Foote can take something of the size and complexity of the Civil War and render it intelligible, and in prose that always pleases and sometimes sings. He also does that thing that I think is too rarely seen in histories (and is one of the reasons I so liked Brand's biography of Ben Franklin): he renders historical figures as fully human rather than as a collection of waxworks dummies on display. You really can make a case for these books being our *Iliad*, or at the very least our *History of the Peloponnesian War*; it's a shame they're not more widely read, the intimidating length notwithstanding. That's how I feel about it now, anyway. See you in 4-6 months!

October 25, 2013

Well, that was longer than 4-6 months, but I've now got Volume 2 (Fredericksburg to Meridian) under my belt, and continue to be impressed by Foote's erudition and delighted by his storytelling. The stand-out in this

volume is, unsurprisingly, Gettysburg; I've never understood either the nature or significance of the battle the way I do now that I've read Foote's account. But in some ways Gettysburg is marginal to the great theme of the volume: the search for a winning Union general, and the Union's salvation in Grant. This is a story masterfully told, and I'm eager to begin Volume 3, which will open with Grant's elevation to overall Union commander.

August 30, 2014

It is accomplished. All told, it took only slightly longer to fight the Civil War than it did for me to read Foote's account of it, but my opinion remains unchanged: this is an absolute masterpiece. There's much that's worth praising in the third volume: the balanced assessments of Grant and Sherman, the dignity of Lee, the blind stubbornness (verging on monomania) of Jefferson Davis in defeat. But the greatest praise must go to the overall impact; I feel like I truly understand the War now in ways I never have, in spite of a lifetime spent reading American history. My only quibble is that the reader hasn't lived with this material the way Foote did, and so it's a bit hard to keep up when Foote tosses off a casual reference to something that happened 2500 pages ago. But that's a minor quibble with this major work, both of history and of storytelling.

Morgan Blackledge says

OMG. It took me like 4 fuckin months to read this colossus, but I finally finished it (all 3, 1000+ page volumes). And yes it totally lives up to the hype. It's a wonderful, masterful piece of narrative history. A treasure.

It's also the most homoerotic thing I've read in a long time. Real talk. Every other sentence was like; 'Lee penetrated deep into Johnson's rear and exploded'.

Not that there's anything wrong with that.....

As a nearly irrelevant aside, the cover lists the Civil War as 'one of National Review's 100 best nonfiction books of the century', which I am totally down for, but I googled it and the book ranks 97th on the list. That feels vaguely misleading on the part of the publisher. It's technically true, yes, but you have to admit, it's a little shady to say.

As I mentioned, the book is epically long. It's great, but it's really insanely long. By the time you get to Appomattox, you're like, come on, this is great and all, but end this thing already. And they do, but there's like 800 pages to go after that. Yow!

Then, the Lincoln assignation is handled in like 10 pages. It's over before you know it. And there is still like 500 pages to go.

Whatever. I absolutely LOVED this book, and I also could not wait to be finished with it.

So that's the best I can do. It's Shelby Foote's epic masterpiece life's work, and that's what I have to say about it.

That's the internet for you. Give Joe Everyman a platform and guys like me feel entitled to weigh in and critique a masterwork of literature with less effort invested than the author spent on any given page.

As DJT is oft to say.....SAD.

In the end the book (and of course the horrific history it accounts) is as tragic and awful as it gets.

Similarly tragic is the painful recapitulation of the horrors of the reconstruction we Americans are suffering at present.

As the cliché would have it. We are doomed to suffer (and suffer again) the nauseating ripples and echoes of the legacy of American history, if we fail to process all of its effects, heal its ghastly wounds and commit once and for all to a fundamentally better way moving forward.

Good history and really good historians may be our best hope for escaping the ruts of the cannonades and wagon trains that preceded us.

Our current state of affairs begs the question, how many more populist uprisings are we to endure before we shed the scaled husk of tribalism and embrace a more enlightened way.

Hopefully, the 3000+ pages of the clarity, eloquence, detail and wit contained in this narrative will serve as a bulwark against the assault of the 140/280 characters worth of practical retardation that currently pound away at our dignity and intelligence like the confederate cannons pounded the walls of fort Sumpter.

I'm giving this particular civil war monument what it plainly deserves.

Five shining stars (hold the bars)!!!!

John says

This magisterial work is the best book that I've read on the Civil War. Incredibly well researched, but if you're looking for something with a lot of footnotes for your own work or research, this isn't it; however, if you're an American history buff or simply a fan of good writing, you should read these books.

Don't be deterred by the length. It's well worth it. The book is written (obviously) as a narrative, not in the sense of historical fiction, but in a prose style most people don't typically associate with history. Foote is vivid and imagistic, and I routinely had nightmares after reading his descriptions of battles. I also found that I was so engrossed with the writing that I found myself turning pages voraciously, akin to the way I read a great thriller, always wondering "what happens next?" I knew a fair amount about the war (at least the results of each major battle), so it's a credit to the engaging quality of Foote's narrative.

The Civil War had a profound effect on American life and consciousness, and there can be no better way to celebrate the 150th anniversary than reading these incredible books.

Paul says

Still have a couple hundred pages in the last volume because I got waylaid with other books to review for actual money -- but Foote's *Civil War* is a true masterpiece. His friend Walker Percy famously called it "an American *Iliad*," which description I cannot dispute.

Carl R. says

It's finally over. I turned the last page of Shelby Foote's (You may remember Foote as the gentlemanly, professorial presence in Ken Burns PBS series.)

monster "narration" of the civil war. Close to 3000 pages detailing every military and political battle in those horrendous four-plus years of slaughter that stand as a monument to human obstinacy and idiocy. Why I needed to do this, when I've already read so much about all this over the years, I can't possibly explain. Probably a 12-step program would help, but like I said it's over now and not worth the further pain recovery would take.

I did learn a lot, and maybe I'll be able to remember some of it. Of all the things I could write about, though, from military to political maneuvers, I think I'll choose names and construction.

One thing about a piece so full of information is this—you get a full account of all the players, big and small. So there are many more characters running through these pages than Grant, Sherman, Lee and Lincoln.

After a while, I began to see repeats. On the southern side, this seemed easily explainable. It was a stratified, aristocratic society in many ways, and the officers tended to come from the upper class, which meant merging and crossing family lines. There were sons and nephews under the command of fathers. So you'd read, for example, of a General Ewell on one page and an Lieutenant Ewell a few pages later. There was a cavalry officer by the name of R.H. Lee. Nephew. Or of a father burying a son after a battle. But then there were other duplicate names that were not family, apparently, as if the population lacked surname imagination. There were two prominent confederate Johnstons. A couple of Johnsons. Confusing repeats. And to take the whole thing farther, how did General Butler get from Virginia to Texas, and why is he a confederate now? And is there really a Union officer named Jefferson Davis? Answer to that question is "yes."

And not all the officers were even military guys, at least not originally. The union's General Butler was a congressman who wanted to be president and thought being a war hero would be a good way to get himself some creds. Same with General Banks. Didn't work out for either of them.

A trivia question: Which side had the most amputee generals? Answer to this one: the south. Hood and Ewell both had to be strapped into their saddles because Hood was minus a leg, Ewell an arm and a leg. Both lost their limbs early in the war, then came back fighting. Talk about idiocy and obstinacy.

And, finally, there's Jefferson Davis himself—the president, not the union officer. I knew he was captured in the final days, but I knew nothing of what happened after. Turns out he worked his way out of prison after a few years, then became an insurance executive in North (or was it South?) Carolina. He was then offered refuge on the plantation of a Louisiana lady much smitten with his cause and his charms. He took her up on it, completed his memoirs in her cottage. There may have been much more to it than simple admiration. His wife refused to join him during this time, and despite his professions of devotion to home and hearth, he chose to stay there anyhow. She did come on down when the benefactress died and left him not only the cottage, but the whole plantation and a couple of more besides.

He lived to a ripe old age (eighty something), unrepentant and unbowed. He never signed the loyalty oath necessary to enfranchise himself. But he did talk in his later years about how given the present circumstances, seeing to the good of the union was the best course for everyone.

Going on to construction: An army's purpose is to kill people and destroy things. So if your opponent depends on a railroad for supplies, it's a good idea to destroy the railroad. This, both sides accomplished over and over. Thing is, it didn't seem to take long to fix a railroad, even if the rails were not only torn up but heated and bent around trees. They could get a hundred miles of rail back in shape in a couple of weeks.

Same with bridges. If someone's chasing you, you want to burn your bridges to slow them down. But a bridge can, apparently, be made ready to cross 5000 troops and a bunch of cannon virtually overnight. Might have to tear down someone's house for the materials, but this is war and your purpose is to destroy things. Furthermore, if the road is muddy and you need some traction and there are some trees in the vicinity, you set troops to chopping. Before long you have a "corduroy" for your men, animals, and guns. Of course if there are no trees, you are SOL, which happened to both sides a lot.

I could go on and on, but I'm not Shelby nor was meant to be, and god as my witness, ain't gonna study war no more in 2010. If I break the pledge, it's rehab here I come.

Mowena Glunch says

This is probably the leading complete history of the Civil War, which for me means there is a great opportunity for someone to write something better.

Good things:

1. Good turn of phrase.
2. Good ability to paint a full personality.

Problems:

1. Too strong a bias in favor of South.
2. Too strong a bias in favor of covering less important western action.
3. Too much filler. Could have trimmed 25%-33% of total words.
4. For me, needed more and better maps, with dates and times on them.
5. Would have benefitted from a "Cast of Players" list so reader could keep straight on who various military figures were, and provide refresher on where one had last read about them.
6. Most importantly, Mr. Foote should have gotten a few more hours of tutoring on basic military art. A stronger reader than I might take on the assignment of counting what seemed like a reuse of "Cannae" hundreds of times during the trilogy.
7. Andersonville deserved at least a paragraph. Can only attribute to Southern protectionism. Could have done it sympathetically.

Allen says

I have read this set half a dozen times -- for a while there I re-read them every summer. Foote was a novelist before he was a historian, and it shows in his style. The books give a fairly even-handed treatment of the military history of the American civil war, using actual quotes to flesh out the interactions among the characters to a surprising extent. One of the best histories I've ever read.

Monty says

Shelby Foote was commissioned to write a concise narrative of the American Civil War in 1958, following his great success with the book, Shiloh. The project grew beyond the bounds of the original plan from

Random House, and blossomed into one of the greatest works ever written about the war. Foote was born in Mississippi, but was later transplanted to Memphis. His was the first Southern voice to describe the Civil War in more than a generation. In spite of his background, he is no disciple of the "lost cause" movement. He was frequently quoted as saying that "The North fought that war with one hand tied behind its back"...referring to the inadequate leaders, misuse of technology, and bungled strategies and tactics employed by the Union forces in the first years of the war.

He also views the failures of the Confederacy in their lack of vision in the Western theater of operations (where the war was lost militarily), and the lack of leadership in depth on that side. He has been taken to task for providing a primarily military narrative of the war, with little emphasis on the economic and/or social backdrop of the war. These elements are actually woven into his work--as the production capacity of the South was crippled with the capture of the Mississippi river, Rail lines, Atlanta, Richmond, and the other few manufacturing areas in the South.

Shelby Foote also demonstrates his respect for Lincoln (long before Ms Godwin's "Team of Rivals") who was fighting the war on multiple fronts. Lincoln was fighting his cabinet, the Copperhead Generals (Democrats who had their own war aims), the Radical Republicans, and come to grips with his own ignorance of modern warfare.

Foote's writing style makes the work. As he was writing he became THE living expert on the Civil War, so much so that Ken Burns and Geoffrey Ward spent much more time interviewing him (5X more) than any other "expert" interviewed for the Civil War PBS series made in 1991. He was an academic who spoke and wrote like a storyteller/novelist, which he was. He is the antithesis of the "facts and dates" school of American history, and has made the subject accessible to generations of Americans. These are must-read books for anyone deeply interested in the topic.

Edward says

Over many years I have read about many Civil War battles, and the problems that Lincoln faced, but this is the first time I have learned in any detail about what the South thought was going on. Without claiming sympathy with the motives of the Lost Cause, Shelby Foote presented a number of speeches and other denunciations of Yankee tyranny, barbarism, cruelty, and alleged racial inferiority from Jefferson Davis and various political and military figures of the Confederacy, and their claim to be the true heirs of the Revolution. They also maintained that the Confederate Constitution represented the Original Intent of the Founders, particularly slave owners like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, in spite of the fact that both freed their slaves in their wills.

This is important particularly because these issues are still alive in the former Confederacy, particularly in the Republican Southern Strategy of racism and resentment starting in 1964, after passage of the Civil Rights Acts and the Voting Rights Act. I have written about that and about the use of Dog Whistle code for White Supremacy and other such issues at Daily Kos, under the name Mokurai, and on dKosopedia, particularly

http://www.dkosopedia.com/wiki/Code_W...

Apart from that, I learned a great deal more about the battles and about the politics, North and South, than I had learned from other sources, and enjoyed learning it more.

Bill Rogers says

Shelby Foote was the silver-haired gentleman with the Robert E. Lee beard who had such interesting

anecdotes to tell during Ken Burns's documentary series *The Civil War*. How do you think he got that job? By writing this trilogy, that's how. Umpty-ump thousand pages, and he did it on paper. With a dip pen no less. He said, in an interview I saw, that he got a better rhythm that way.

I believe it. Often I find myself turning to pen and paper too, although I've never gone so far as dip pens.

There's certainly nothing wrong with this trilogy's writing style. Foote goes into great detail and makes the time live and breathe. It is a classic history; if it were about half as long it would be better known, but it wouldn't go into the depth of detail that makes it unique.

Like all Civil War histories, the interesting and exciting parts are at the beginning. By the end of the war all the illusions had been stripped away. The armies of both sides had gone from eager volunteers out for adventure to bitter veterans and unwilling draftees engaged in an industrial war of attrition; from the fifes and drums of the Revolution to the trench warfare of Verdun and Flanders, in four years. The Civil War taught anyone who had eyes to see that if war ever had been bright flags and heroic adventure, (which it hadn't, of course,) it wasn't that now, and it never would be again. In fact, it had become so horrible that we couldn't even lie to ourselves about it any more.

Or so you'd like to think.

In any case, by the time I got to the end of this trilogy I was wondering how much longer the blood and suffering could go on. "Until every drop of blood drawn by the lash is repaid by one drawn by the sword," apparently; and beyond.

For all that, anyone interested in the United States should read a good history of the Civil War, and this is one of the best. As Foote himself said, everything the United States has become since, good and bad, we became because of this war.

Nick Black says

Confederate troops wore not just grey, but also "butternut".

Susan says

I couldn't find a listing for just Volume 3: Red River to Appomattox which I finished this year. Last year I read the first two volumes.

This is the last volume which covered Grant arriving in Washington to take up duties as commander—and looking like a scruffy nonentity who was offered a room in the attic of Willard's Hotel until the clerk saw his name—to the death of Jefferson Davis (Foote is a southerner after all). Really great work—it's taken me a couple of years to read it.

There I think Foote focused on the South more, but not to the extent of being unfair. I was amazed that the death of Lincoln was treated relatively perfunctorily—but it may be that I was disappointed because I had been so wrapped up in the assassination details and the plot details (to kill Seward and Stanton too) in Goodwin's *Team of Rivals*, which I had just read, that this one seemed decidedly minimalist. And the book ended with Jefferson Davis going back to Mississippi—actually it ended with the death of Davis many years

later as if only then was the war really over! I gathered there was considerable admiration for Davis on Foote's part. Me, I'd never considered Davis as a person at all. I had considered Alexander Stephens (partly because that was my husband's name). Something else I read awhile ago (possibly McPherson) detailed his friendship with Lincoln when they were both together in Congress many years before.

I'm not one for military details, but I found Foote's focus on "mistakes" of southern generals like Hood and Johnson (always forget whether it was Johnson or Johnston--I mean Joseph Johnson) interesting. They seemed to do little right while Sherman did everything right and I sense there was even some affection for him on Foote's part. And I was surprised that he didn't make as much as other histories I've read of the possibility of generals not surrendering and continuing a guerilla war for years. I thought he downplayed Nathan Bedford Forrest too, in that regard but also just as a Southern hero.

Still I'm no Civil War expert and no matter how hard I try, it's the people and the human events that engage me more than the battles and the strategy. Foote is very good at that. If Red River to Appomattox ended with the death of Jefferson Davis, it began with Grant's coming to Washington and being taken for a run-of-the-mill nonentity general when he asked for a room at Willard's hotel--until he signed his name. I'd not have persisted through all the battles if his dealing with people and his ability to conjure up memorable vignettes were not so good.

Donna Davis says

I purchased Foote's trilogy because it was a well-known trilogy about the American Civil War. All told, it was a waste of time and money.

I had read Battle Cry of Freedom, and become much more interested in this field than when I began teaching it to 8th graders. I read one of Sears' books, a couple more by McPherson, and some that dealt with African-Americans, both in slavery, in the resistance to slavery, and their participation, which is considered pivotal, in the Civil War.

Here are some of the ways in which I found Foote's trilogy miserably lacking:

- * though full of detail, the details selected for viewing are skewed so far toward the secessionist effort that he refers to the president as Davis, and the various cabinet members posts, Secretary of War, etc are all also members of the Confederate government-in-waiting, members of a so-called government that existed solely during a failed Civil War, recognized by no other entity. Union soldiers and officers are referred to most of the time as "the enemy". These things alone should have caused Foote to leave aside his shuck-and-jive introduction about being a sucker for a lost cause, and instead honestly include in the title, making it "The Civil War: A Confederate Perspective", or something similar.

- * Though he says he has written a nonfiction series, using narrative form because he wrote primarily as a novelist (which he was good at and should have stuck to, IMHO), he takes the third person omniscient, stating what various members of the secessionist army and political leadership were thinking at so many times that it is hard to believe his blanket statement that it is all documented; it surely is not referenced, as the McPherson work I am currently reading is. His bibliography is rife with Confederate sources, and though Sherman's memoirs show up there, he uses them sparingly. More on that. But again, in terms of factual information, he somehow has lengthy passages of dialogue that once again, are not referenced, and again, I find myself wondering whether he has not veered into the land of historical fiction, where he feels more comfortable.

*If one read no other work on the American Civil War than Foote's, one would come out badly misinformed. In the Battle Cry of Freedom, the valorous crossing of the Chattahoochie River as Sherman and his men enter the heavily fortified, tactically critical city of Atlanta is described in detail. The men strip down and cross naked (Sherman adds, except for their boots), and since they must ford a surging river chest-deep, they hold their weapons above their heads. If they must fire, they reload, still overhead as practiced (this is no longer Sherman, whose memoir is remarkably modest, it is McPherson), with their heads under water to avoid being struck, and then raise up, fire, and move forward. It is an astonishing feat, well worthy of history books. How does Foote deal with this? First, he lets us know that the Chattahoochie was a pleasant temperature by referring to the Union soldiers as bathing 100 days' grime off of themselves in its balmy depths. Then later, he makes a lot of hay out of the cleverness of Hood seeing to it that bridges are destroyed or guarded, but refers to the Union's crossing of the Chattahoochie as "amphibious crossing". Two words. Sherman reports that once they were out (and he makes it light and funny, but you can also see the sacrifice his men have made in carrying this out, and HOW many commanders could persuade troops to do this?), they entered Atlanta, and there they were, naked and shivering, cold and wet, right in the middle of town. Can you see why I find the discrepancy in reporting to be deplorable?

* There are more of Davis's words here than there are of Lincoln's, as many references to the Confederate Breckinridge, nearly, as there are to Sherman.

* fewer than ten pages in this entire trilogy refer to Black people ("Negroes" or worse, and these were more numerous and generally listed along with property, the "N" word, and I know it's historically accurate, but I won't use it). There is no mention, for example, of the fact that the first troops to enter Richmond following the collapse of the Confederacy were Black troops. The best Foote can do is within 2 or 3 sentences, admit that the Confederate army collected few Black troops, most of whom deserted, whereas the Union was able to recruit nearly one million, and over 600,000 were still serving (and many of those missing were either dead, wounded, or horror of horrors, prisoners) at the end of the war.

There is a reason McPherson won the Pulitzer. There is a reason Foote didn't.

If you want to read one immensely competent history of the Civil War and be done with it, read McPherson's Battle Cry of Freedom. It is dense and highly literate and will take a long time. It is not folksy and crowded with amusing little vignettes, but it is accurate down to the last letter.

If you are a die-hard southerner whose ancestors fought for the Confederacy and a large piece of you is still adjusting to the fact that it failed and the Union stands, maybe you'll like this. It took up six months of my life (though I also read other books to improve my mood), and countless hours that I can never get back. Apart from a few little tidbits that were interesting but nonessential, this was a waste of time.
