The Library of America interviews Brooks D. Simpson about The Civil War: The First Year

In connection with the publication in January 2011 of *The Civil War: The First Year Told by Those Who Lived It*, edited by Brooks D. Simpson, Stephen W. Sears, and Aaron Sheehan-Dean, Rich Kelley conducted this exclusive interview for The Library of America e-Newsletter.

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The Civil War: The First Year Told by Those Who Lived It *collects some 120 different pieces—diary entries, letters, speeches, memoirs—from more than sixty contributors—generals and soldiers, slave owners and slaves, society belles and plantation mistresses. What do we learn from this approach to recapturing a time that we don't get from more narrative or analytical treatments?*

This book presents the events of 1860 and 1861 as they unfolded in the eyes of the people who experienced them. How did Americans make sense of the world in which they lived? What were their hopes and fears? What did they believe was happening? What did it all mean for them? The volume attempts to recapture the immediacy and intimacy of historical events as understood by those who were there.

Many significant events occurred during the period covered by the book—November 1860 until January 1862: Lincoln's election in November and inauguration in March, the secession of the Southern states, the firing on Fort Sumter, the Battle of Bull Run—and, as the chronology and entries indicate, many smaller dramas as well. What stands out for you?

Although one could point to the firing on Fort Sumter as transforming everything overnight, what stands out—more than any one incident—is the

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rush of events, one coming on the heels of another, each one changing what people expected and anticipated and pointing to a war that no one quite understood. Although people often fight wars to preserve and protect various things they hold dear . . . a way of life, political rights, social order, economic interests, patriotism . . . wars are inherently revolutionary and create a momentum of their own, changing things as they evolve, sometimes in unanticipated ways.

The book features pieces by many well-known names—speeches by Abraham Lincoln, Jefferson Davis, Frederick Douglass; poems by Walt Whitman and Herman Melville—and a host of observations from many lesser-known writers—Union corporal Samuel J. English and Confederate surgeon Lunsford P. Yandell. Each has its own eloquence. Can we attribute this to what war evokes from those fated to experience it?

War makes us reflect on who we are, what we believe, and what we want for ourselves. It reduces existence to the essentials, and, for all the confusion it brings, it can also serve to clarify what's important. Sometimes the most effective prose is shorn of ornate effects, revealing raw emotion and basic beliefs. These letters give voice to those thoughts in powerful and compelling ways. The Confederate surgeon you mention offers a poignant example when he writes:

As to the variety of expression depicted on the faces of the corpses, of which I heard so much, I saw nothing of it. They all looked pretty much alike—as much alike as dead men from any other cause. Some had their eyes open, some closed; some had their mouths open, and others had them closed. There is a terrible sameness in the appearance of all the dead men I have ever seen.

Do you have any favorite passages?

As much as I like reading the correspondence of Grant and Sherman, I find the descriptions offered by New Yorker George Templeton Strong to be quite compelling. His observations are insightful and reflect his skepticism over early reports and extreme reactions. We find him immediately questioning, for instance, reports that Charleston is burning after the firing on Fort Sumter because the Federal boats would have no reason to go that far into the harbor. Today's readers would find him to be very much like themselves. Grant's reflections on his first experience in command strike me as amusing and revealing: "I

never forgot that [the opposing commander] had as much reason to fear my forces as I had his."

The contributions from the generals display a range of writing styles. Would it be fair to characterize Robert E. Lee as having the more eloquent and elegant style, followed by Grant's crisp and straightforward dispatches, to the choppier and more colloquial styles of McClellan and Sherman?

Lee always seemed to be writing as if someone was looking over his shoulder. He was always thinking about how he might appear to others. Sherman wrote as he thought, quickly, rarely pausing or reflecting on how his words sounded or even what he was saying. Sometimes his letters read as if he was blowing off immense amounts of steam lest he otherwise explode. Grant's prose at its best is simple and direct, breaking things down to their essentials, a quality of mind that helps explain why he excelled at mathematics. He could explain a problem, consider what might happen, and offer a solution. Unfortunately for McClellan, he shared his emotions and his inner thoughts in letters to his wife, much like Sherman, and so the impression of him that we have is shaped by reading thoughts we might ourselves think but never share in any writing that we thought would be seen by others. See in particular the August 16, 1861, letter in which he observes "the Presdt is an idiot, the old General [Winfield Scott] in his dotage."

"What a pity," South Carolina diarist Catherine Edmonston complains, "that politics will intrude into private life," when her mother upbraids her as being "dishonest and dishonorable" for her secessionist talk. The way her entries—and those by other women—intersperse talk of war with mundane matters shows just how invasive and divisive the war was. Are these writings exceptional cases—or typical of what women experienced during that time?

The Civil War challenged traditional boundaries between the personal and the political, the private and the public. The war affected women, and women contributed to shaping the course of the conflict. These entries remind us that women were not afraid of expressing political opinions. While most of the writings we have are from middle or upper class women, working women

also made known their sentiments in various ways, both in prose and in practice. The samples we reproduce are representative rather than exceptional in terms of women possessing and expressing views on the events of the day.

The longest entry in the book is probably also the most engrossing—and the most devastating to the reputation of the Union Army: the account by* London Times *war correspondent William Howard Russell of the Battle of Bull Run in July. How did accounts like Russell's affect the public's perception of the war?

Most people experienced the battlefield second-hand. Readers found Russell's vivid prose and engaging descriptions compelling, even when they were infuriated by his tale of defeat and disaster. Compounding the impact of Russell's description was the fact that he was an English correspondent, and Americans were always a bit too eager to learn what their transatlantic cousins thought. During the war, other reporters offered accounts that in their way were equally as important in shaping popular perceptions of battle, including Whitelaw Reid's account of the battle of Shiloh, which will appear in the next volume. Russell's dispatch serves as an example of how media accounts fundamentally shape public perceptions for better and for worse.

The book includes several letters penned by Ulysses S. Grant. We first encounter him working in his father's store in April. It's remarkable that he didn't receive his commission as colonel until June and yet by August he was a brigadier general. What do Grant's contributions reveal about his momentous first year of combat?

Ulysses S. Grant was a deceptively simple man, one who understood some things better than did most Americans in 1861, and one whose unpretentious common sense contained far more insight than did the musings of supposedly superior intellects. A man with both northern and southern ties, the son of an antislavery man who married into a slaveholder's family, a man who for a short time owned a slave and yet knew the family that fought for Dred Scott's freedom, Grant was in a position to understand both sides. He believed the South would put up a fight and that the resulting war would, as he put it, result in "the doom of slavery."

Grant's candor about his early war experiences reminds us of how he

learned from those challenges and grew as a commander who understood not only how to fight, but also why one was fighting. He describes both the pressures of command and the realization that the fellow on the other side wrestles with the same problems. If Grant's confidence is born of common sense, it nevertheless helps explain why in the end he succeeded where others failed.

The contents of the book are arranged chronologically but I'm wondering if you might recommend alternate pathways readers might take if, for instance, they wanted to focus on specific themes: battle accounts, for instance, or political arguments, or life at home, or little-known aspects of the war.

Readers can fashion their own ways of navigating the book. One way is to highlight the statements offered by political leaders on both sides; another is by looking at how soldiers described what was going on to the folks at home; a third would be by sampling the writings of women. One might also look at the various mentions of slavery and its role in the conflict. In 1865 Abraham Lincoln would observe that both sides knew that the war was "somehow" about slavery, something some people today are reluctant to acknowledge. Not so the people at the time. Slavery and its future prospects were at the heart of secessionist and Confederate rhetoric, not only in speeches but in entries like the one in which Richmond diarist Mary Chesnut tells the story of a slave who captures a lost Federal soldier: "They were not ripe for John Brown, you see." To acknowledge slavery's central importance is to embrace historical accuracy, not some subsequent agenda. At the same time one can see how Northerners debated the future of slavery, and how black leaders such as Frederick Douglass saw in the war an opportunity to advance the cause of emancipation.

The Civil War: The First Year ***is even-handed in collecting accounts by proslavery advocates and abolitionists, soldiers and slaves, unionists and secessionists. But weren't there other issues that divided people at the time?***

White southerners were candid in stating that their concerns about slavery were fundamental, whether or not they favored secession: protecting slavery was at the heart of the secessionist movement and the formation of the Confederacy. We do them a disservice by saying that secession was about

something else or minimizing the role of slavery. Northern accounts do not always share such common interests. They often express concern about whether the war to preserve the Union will change it. However, one of the main contributions of this series is to document the diversity of opinions within the white North and white South, reminding us that the divisions of the war did not end with Union and Confederate. At times the debates within each side are as telling as the differences between each side, and one sees that both white Northerners and white Southerners debated the same issues, including the role of the central government and the extent to which concerns about slavery should shape the war effort.

Deciding what to include from the voluminous amount of material available must have been difficult. What was the hardest choice you had to make? Did putting together this volume lead you to new discoveries about this period?

For every document we chose to include, we had to exclude many others. One could compose a volume twice as long with no difficulty. Doubtless some people might quibble that we should have included this or that, but it would be difficult to challenge what Aaron Sheehan-Dean, Stephen Sears, and I agreed to include, with the helpful advice of a board of advisors and the people at Library of America. Most difficult was achieving a balance between telling the story of the war in terms of battles and speeches—the traditional narrative of presidents and politicians, generals and soldiers—and bringing in other voices to show the entire experience of war. While I personally made no new discoveries, I was impressed with the fact that so many people were able to wrestle with the issues at stake and that their writings reflected a rather sophisticated understanding of events.

How do you think* The Civil War: The First Year *differs from the successive three volumes in this series?

As Stephen Sears, Aaron Sheehan-Dean, and I move forward with the next three volumes, the story of the destruction of slavery and the meaning of emancipation will emerge as a far more significant and visible theme. So will a sense of the cataclysmic nature of the conflict, the challenges of division and dissent at home, and an emerging realization of the transformative nature of war. Such

stories will complement the established narrative of battles, political as well as military. The voices will become even more diverse as new people appear on the stage. We will also watch Lincoln, Grant, and Sherman evolve as men who understand not only how but also why the Union persists, look on as Davis grapples with the challenges of governing the Confederacy, and see Lee ponder the problem of achieving victory and then resist the signs of approaching defeat.

When and how did you first become engrossed with the history of the conflict?

I'm happy that I'm doing something I enjoy doing; my interest in history is by no means limited to the American Civil War. However, I first became interested in the Civil War during the celebration of the centennial of the conflict. Aware that I had ancestors who fought with the Army of the Potomac, I enjoyed visiting battlefields and other Civil War–related sites, including Grant's Tomb. Family members fed this passion with toy soldiers and books, especially the works of Bruce Catton, which I eagerly devoured. To this day I feel something special when I stand on the ground once occupied by an ancestor's unit, including Culp's Hill and Little Round Top at Gettysburg and Saunders Field in the Wilderness. It's exciting and rewarding to know that this volume will bring to a wider readership some of the very documents which engaged my own interest. I hope that reading the volume will make the experience of the war more intimate and immediate and deepen every reader's understanding of the terrible conflict that did so much to make us who we are today.