

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Ulysses S. Grant (1822-1885)

From *Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*

Readers of *The Education of Henry Adams* know Adams's unflattering portrait of Grant: a "pre-intellectual, archaic" enigma who as president started the country on "a policy of drift," while also seemingly blind to enormous corruption in government.¹

The *Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*, which conclude with the end of the Civil War in 1865, show a very different kind of man, although to many readers still a puzzling one. The two volumes, totaling over 1200 pages, begin with his ancestry and childhood and then proceed rapidly through his time at West Point to his service in the Mexican War. By 1854 he has resigned from the army. But in 1861, living in Galena, Illinois, he helps organize Illinois volunteers, and is made a colonel. Then, as the war progresses, he moves from battle to battle, gaining larger commands, besieging Vicksburg, taking it on July 4, 1863, and becoming lieutenant-general in March, 1864, with command of all the armies of the United States. As a result of Grant's ever-widening role, the reader gets an ever-expanding view of the magnitude of the war, while the *Memoirs* press on, as inevitable as fate. Yet, throughout, Grant's language remains modest and firm and without the exaggerated heroic tones, contentiousness, and self-justifications that without the exaggerated heroic tones, contentiousness, and self-justifications that became almost standard features in other autobiographies of Civil War officers.

Alexander Stephens, the vice-president of the Confederacy, said of Grant, "He is one of the most remarkable men I have ever met. He does not seem to be aware of his powers."² The comment is suggestive, and it is borne out by the famous story of Grant's first expecting to publish the *Memoirs* with the Century Company, which had promised only a ten percent royalty and predicted sales of only five to ten thousand copies. Grant had been swindled by business partners, was sick and in debt, and believed this was a good offer. But Mark Twain offered to publish them by subscription, and they soon sold 300,000 copies, earning \$450,000 for Grant's family. (Grant died of cancer of the throat on July 23, 1885, a week after finishing the manuscript.)

While home on vacation from West Point, Grant was teased for wearing a fancy military uniform, and he came to prefer utilitarian dress, as at Appomattox. This plain dress, in turn, fits with his plain language and his objection to misty legends like the "story of the apple tree" and how he supposedly returned Lee's sword. Yet Grant is still the stuff of legend, and he is often made a symbol of Union determination, the democratic values of the Union soldier, and the North's mastery of industrial warfare. Aspects of all these qualities show up here. So does the archetype with which the United States entered many other wars: that the country was a Sleeping Giant, peaceful and complacent until aroused to a just and mighty fury. Can a man have tapped into so many of the strongest legends, the latent narrative structures, in his culture and still been unaware of his power?

For further reflection, Grant can be compared to other military autobiographers like Black Hawk and Ethan Allen, to other writers about war like Chesnut Sarah Benjamin and Nathan B. Jennings, and to the pacifists Dorothy Day and Roderick Seidenberg.

The excerpt below, headed "Negotiations at the Appomattox—Interview with Lee at McLean's House—The terms of surrender—Lee's surrender—Interview with Lee after the Surrender," is the whole of Chapter 67 of the first edition of *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant* (New York: Charles L. Webster and Co., 1885). This is still the authoritative text, but the library of America provides a good, available reprint. Two excellent short studies of Grant and his *Memoirs* appear in Edmund Wilson's chapter "Northern Soldiers: Ulysses S. Grant," in *Patriotic Gore* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962), and James M. Cox's "U.S. Grant: The Man in the *Memoirs*," in his *Recovering Literature's Lost Ground* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1989).

1. Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918), pp. 265, 267.
2. Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962, p. 142

Reading

Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant

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