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RETROSPECTS OF A RETIRED WAR VETERAN

Those who fought in, or lived through, or even heard some faint dying echoes of our Civil War, will not soon tire of reading its history as told from many points of view by those whose valor and ability helped to bring it to a fortunate termination. To the list of noteworthy military memoirs penned by American soldier-authors there is now added General James Harrison Wilson's detailed and interesting recollections of his eventful campaigns in the great struggle of half a century ago and of his less sanguinary experiences in the short conflict with Spain. "Under the Old Flag" traces, in two stout volumes, the course of its writer's life from boyhood in a small Illinois town through the formative years of a West Point training, the hardening and ripening years of military service immediately afterward, at the outbreak of the Civil War, the subsequent campaigns in which promotion and increased responsibilities were not slow to follow, the peaceful interval of a third of a century, and the parts played in the war with Spain, the reconstruction of Cuba, and the suppression of the Boxers in China.

Only a few of the most prominent features of so extensive a work can be touched upon in any general survey of its merits. New lights on some of our national heroes, fresh views of certain historic events, a fuller realization of perils encountered and difficulties overcome by the shapers of our country's destinies — these are afforded by the graphic narrative before us.

He served first in the Port Royal expedition, afterward in the Antietam campaign, and was then assigned to various duties in rather rapid succession, and with equally rapid promotion from a lieutenancy to higher and higher offices until we find him commanding a division of Sheridan's cavalry, afterward organizing and commanding a cavalry corps of the Military Division of the Mississippi, then directing the assault upon and capture of

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Selma and Montgomery and other positions in the South, and, finally, effecting the pursuit and capture of Jefferson Davis. Many famous generals, as Grant, Sherman, McClellan, Hooker, under or with whom he fought, pass across the writer's pages in an almost living and breathing reality. Two peculiar regrets in connection with this excellent record are felt by the author, who says in an early chapter :

“Looking back on my military life, I have only two regrets in connection with it: first, that I was never an enlisted man in the infantry or cavalry, because, with my health, activity, powers of endurance, and skill in handling a rifle and a horse, I always felt that I would have been as good a soldier as could be found anywhere in the ranks, while I was far from having the same confidence in my capacity as a commissioned officer; and, second, that I was never a prisoner of war, because I felt that the privation and ill treatment of that fate would have stimulated me to even greater determination and services in behalf of the Union cause.”

Like any other full account of our military operations in 1861-65, General Wilson's narrative makes the reader vividly aware of the blunders committed, the disasters narrowly escaped, the unskill and unreadiness displayed, at the opening of the war, and the seeming ease with which, under wiser direction, the conflict could have been brought to a close long before its actual end. For example, had a younger and more alert man than the veteran Scott been at the head of the army when hostilities began, how different might have been the course of subsequent events! But the writer pays appropriate tribute to General Scott's merits. In contrasting him with another Virginian, Lee, he says :

“In these later days when it is the fashion to magnify the virtues of Lee, not only as a military man, but as a patriot, it seems to me that the country is in danger of forgetting its immense debt of gratitude to General Scott, who was fully Lee's equal as a soldier and far greater than Lee as a patriot. His conquest of Mexico was a performance of the first rank and that is more than can be said of Lee's best campaign. Scott's patriotism, unlike Lee's, was neither provincial nor bounded by state lines, but was national and all-embracing. He gave his services at all times and all places to the whole country, without hesitation and without question. Like Douglas, his example was worth an army to the Union cause. All eyes were, indeed, turned to the veteran Brevet Lieutenant General Scott, second of that rank in America, for inspiration and guidance, and no one looked to him with more anxiety than Lincoln, the newly-elected President. Happily both for him and the cause

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The following passage presents Grant in a guise not too familiar to be interesting. It was Grant's influence and favor that acted most powerfully in securing the author's recognition as an able organizer and commander, and his promotion to rank befitting his quality. Of the impression made by the older man on the younger at their first meeting we read:

"Putting on no airs whatever and using nothing but the mildest and cleanest language, he treated me from the start with cordiality and without the slightest assumption of personal or official superiority. As I afterward learned, this was always his way, and while he invited no confidences, he repelled none, and thus got all that were worth having. Showing no sign whatever of hard living or bad habits, he produced a pleasant but by no means striking impression at first. With what I heard from others, I naturally suspended judgment, and as my first orders were to join McPherson with the right wing of the army for the movement about to begin, instead of to settle down at headquarters and organize my branch of the staff service, I naturally got the impression that Grant was neither a great organizer nor much of a theorist in military matters. This opinion grew gradually into a settled conviction, and in spite of his great achievements, which were won mainly by attention to broad general principles rather than to technical details, I have never had occasion to materially change these earlier impressions."

It appears from General Wilson's account, that he and Major Rawlins first conceived, or first put into words, the plan, later adopted by Grant, of running the Vicksburg batteries by night. In a council of war held some time before the bold project was put into execution, all sorts of plans were discussed. We quote a portion of the narrative at this point:

"Whereupon Rawlins explained my proposition to run the batteries under cover of darkness with the gunboats and transports and march the troops below by land, to the first feasible crossing.

"As Rawlins had predicted, Sherman at once and

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with emphasis declared: 'It can't be done. It is impracticable. The transports will be destroyed. The enemy's guns will sink them or set them afire.' And that settled it for the time being, for although Rawlins gave the reasons clearly and emphatically for the faith that was in us, no one came to his support. Even Grant kept silent, though he tells us clearly enough in his memoirs, written many years afterward, that it was his purpose from the first to carry that plan into effect if the others failed."

To refer at any length to the rather absurdly inconspicuous part assigned to General Wilson when he offered his services in the Spanish-American War, would exceed the limits allowed to this review. But he seems to have accepted his lot with the cheerful acquiescence of a true soldier. To gain a more intelligent appreciation of his character and worth one may turn to Nicolay and Hay's "Life of Lincoln," to which the present book makes pardonable reference. Among other notices of General Wilson, we read:

"The ride of Wilson's troopers into Alabama was one of the most important and fruitful expeditions of the war. . . . If the Confederacy had not already been wounded to death, the loss of Selma would have been irreparable. . . . It justified by its celerity, boldness, and good judgment the high encomium with which Grant sent Wilson to Thomas."

If still further aids are desired to an estimation of General Wilson's worth as a soldier, they are not far to seek. He is one of three brothers who served with distinction in the Civil War, and a tribute he pays to his brother Henry's bravery enables one to surmise what are likely to have been his own exhibitions of cool daring when put to the test. He writes of Henry:

"He had early become known to the leading generals as an active and fearless officer and an excellent drill-master with remarkable presence of mind. He had led his company in the successful charge against the enemy's works at Donelson, had been shot through the body, as he thought, and paralyzed, had been pulled to cover under the hillside he had just surmounted, by a comrade who covered him with a blanket and left him for dead, had revived, cut a crutch, rejoined his company, and fought with it till night when the bullet was cut out of his back. Fortunately it had 'gone around, not through' him. At Shiloh he distinguished himself by leading his men to the capture of a battery and by turning it against the enemy. Having been drilled for a year at West Point, he was as much at home in the artillery as he was with the infantry. While working the captured guns, one of his gunners thoughtlessly dropped an arnful

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of shrapnel near the muzzle of a piece, the flash from which set the wrappings on fire. Fearing an explosion, my brother, without tremor or a moment's hesitation, seized the shell and hurled it to the front where its explosion did no harm. It was in allusion to this and other gallant feats that General Oglesby, afterward senator and governor of Illinois, said with an emphatic oath: "Captain Wilson was the bravest man I ever knew!"

In fulness and readability, "Under the Old Flag" is the best work of its kind that has appeared since General Howard gave us his two volumes of autobiography five years ago. In "human interest," which it is the present fashion to clamor for, it would be difficult to indicate how the book could be improved.

PERCY F. BICKNELL.