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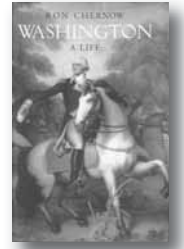


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Washington: a life

by Ron Chernow

Allen Lane (Penguin Books Ltd.): London; 2010; 904 pp.; ISBN: 978-1-846-14402-8;
RRP\$59.95 (hardback); Ursula Davidson Library call number: 482 CHERN 2010



The American Civil War: a military history

by John Keegan

Vintage Books: London; 2010; 396 pp.; ISBN: 978 0 712 616 102; RRP \$21.95 (paperback);
Ursula Davidson Library call number: 564 KEEG 2010

If you thought that no new insights could be shed on America's revolutionary or civil wars you would be wrong as these two excellent additions to the Ursula Davidson Library attest.

Washington is an expertly narrated biography of America's first general and then first president and provides a deftly nuanced portrait of a man who was "first in war, first in peace and first in the hearts of his countrymen". Tracing his life from childhood, through his early explorations of previously unexplored hinterland and service in the militia, to his command of the American army during the Revolutionary War, and to his presidency, retirement and death, Chernow depicts an active man who learns from his mistakes, views others realistically and competently steers America through difficult times.

This is Ron Chernow's sixth book. He won a United States National Book Award for an earlier work, *The House of Morgan*. A skilled biographer, he has based this work on thorough research as evidenced by the 817 pages of text being supported by 84 pages of references. The 37 illustrations reflect careful research into paintings, locket and etchings of the period.

The examination of Washington's early years demonstrates how they contributed to the formation of his character, ambition and desire for equality between the American colonists and the English. The consideration of the status and role of African-American slaves on the plantations and in the houses of George and Martha Washington provides insight into an often overlooked era of black history. As was common at the time, Washington's will freed his slaves at his death. As many had married slaves of his wife who would continue in her service, the complexity of this issue becomes evident.

The politics of uniting 13 different colonies of varied sizes and with varied sources of income, religious persuasions, ancestry, land use and settlement are depicted at various stages. Washington was consistently the one man who seemed to be able to transcend the local focus for the common good. The reader comes to understand the temperament of other contemporary politicians, such as Jefferson who favoured a less centrally-focused government, and how Washington managed them.

Through colonial exploration and expansion, a war against England and the foundation of a new nation, Washington is portrayed as a person of leadership, maturity, ethics and vision. This book should appeal to all

who are interested in high-level leadership in war and peace.

When Sir John Keegan, defence editor of Britain's *Daily Telegraph* and leading military historian, applies his analytical skills to the American Civil War, the resulting volume provides highly readable, fresh perspectives on the first war of the industrial age. He attempts to make sense of the war, rather than arguing its rights or wrongs, or simply re-telling the story chronologically. A key focus is geography, relating the terrain of the war to its battles/events, chronology, strategy and logic. A 2-page, clearly annotated, map is positioned before the initial chapter to assist readers to follow the movements of the key armies.

Having written before on North America, Keegan is able to link the events of the American Revolution and early 1800s to the gestation of the conflict. He notes that the South lacked a leader who could communicate as clearly and strongly as Lincoln. The early battles were dismissed by Europeans as "conflicts between armed mobs". In Keegan's view, even at Gettysburg, few men really knew how to fight. By war's end, there were more than a million casualties with 200,000 having been killed in battle. This total exceeded American fatalities in World War II and is comparable to European losses in the Great War or Russia's losses in World War II.

Keegan concludes that the Confederate government was much less efficient than that in Washington and notes that, with the war being about states' rights, many Confederate state governors and legislators pursued state interests rather than those of the Confederacy. This included keeping men at home in state militias consuming resources that should have been sent to the Confederate armies in Tennessee and Virginia.

International diplomacy also was of great importance to both sides. The Union continued to apply the Monroe Doctrine stating that it would resist any intervention by any Old World nation. The Confederacy, in contrast, wanted recognition and believed that its exports, especially the 4 million bales of cotton that it shipped to Britain annually, would result in sufficient pressure on the British government to bring recognition. Keegan provides detailed social and political analysis of why Britain did not recognise the Confederacy.

If you have never read a military history of the American Civil War, this is the volume to read.

Priscilla Leece