



Hymns of the Republic: The Story of the Final Year of the American Civil War by S.C. Gwynne.

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Wars rarely end quietly. The American Civil War was no exception. Its final year featured some of its bloodiest battles, costliest campaigns, and one of the most consequential presidential elections in US history. In *Hymns of the Republic*, Pulitzer Prize finalist S.C. Gwynne tells the story of this tumultuous year, when the great American conflagration came to its final, violent conclusion. In describing these momentous events, Gwynne argues convincingly that Federal leadership under Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, and William T. Sherman developed a war-winning strategy, while their Confederate counterparts Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee failed to stave off defeat.

Gwynne proceeds chronologically, beginning the story in early spring 1864. He opens with Grant's March 1864 reception in Washington, DC, after his selection to overall command of the Federal armies. In describing Lincoln and Grant's first meeting, Gwynne lays out his book's structure and themes. *Hymns of the Republic* is not a strictly political or military history, but a combination of the two, much as the war itself influenced American politics while the political establishment altered the course of the conflict.

Gwynne next moves to an account of the Fort Pillow massacre, using the Confederate butchering of African American soldiers as a means to clarify the war's revolutionary impact on American society and the coming bloodshed of the 1864 campaigns.

Several of the book's early chapters focus on the series of engagements between Grant and Lee known as the Overland Campaign. Gwynne stresses Grant's positive influence on the morale and fighting spirit of the Federal army and his resolution to see the war finished. A longtime journalist, he describes this change with a literary flourish. An example is his depiction of the attitude change within the Army of the Potomac after Grant's decision to continue marching toward Richmond following the stalemate in the Wilderness.

As the group passed, the soldiers recognized General Grant and his staff. In the same moment they also came to the thundering realization that these riders were heading south. South! Toward Richmond. And this changed everything. They swung their hats and set pine knots and leaves on fire to light Grant's way. Here, finally, was purpose and direction and courage, too, instilled by a man who in his life had steadfastly refuse to acknowledge defeat. (51)

Such vivid accounts appear throughout, making the narrative both informative and riveting.

Gwynne proceeds through the bloody summer of 1864, the uncertainty of the 1864 election, then finally through the war's closing months. In the process, he intersperses stories of historical figures who affected the war in both major and minor ways. The author balances the activities of Grant, Lee, and Sherman with those of lesser figures like medical advocate Clara Barton or guerrilla fighter John Mosby. The result is a richer narrative than one concentrating only on principal political and military leaders. One gets a sense of the war's impact on the common American—soldier and civilian alike.

Three of the book's twenty-three chapters present in-depth appraisals of Lee, Grant, and Sherman. In "The Man who Lost Everything," we encounter a prewar Lee "who had left no particular mark on the earth ..., no hard evidence that he had ever lived" (132). Gwynne emphasizes that the Robert E. Lee of legend and myth existed only during the war, but credits him with perseverance and hope even as the conflict turned conclusively against the Confederacy. So too, he examines Grant's turbulent prewar history and thinking in the war's final year. He stresses his personal resiliency and deft engagement with the political dimension of the conflict. Finally, in his aptly titled chapter, "The Moralist from Hell," Gwynne scrutinizes the evolution of Sherman's thinking on destructive war. His willingness to wage hard war against the Confederate populace reflected his experience with partisans and guerrillas. Yet, despite his recourse to property destruction and dispossession, Sherman's approach was deliberate, measured, and the product of continued Confederate resistance, not wanton violence and devastation.

With Grant, Sherman, and Lee in the forefront, Gwynne masterfully blends the political and military campaign that ended the American Civil War, from Atlanta through the March to the Sea, to Appomattox. He highlights Grant's tendency to see the war as a single theater along with Sherman's willingness to crush the Confederates' political and social will to continue the fight. Gwynne debunks ahistorical notions that Sherman's campaigns needlessly brutalized the Southern population; that said, he makes it clear that "black people, on the other hand, were abused by both sides, and most of the racial violence, went unreported" (239). None of the war's key leaders escape Gwynne's critical eye, though he contrasts the multifaceted and far-reaching Federal campaign with the Confederacy's inability to generate a war winning strategy or negotiate a peace settlement. In Gwynne's version of the Civil War, the Federals won *decisively*.

Though S.C. Gwynne advances no new theories or research material regarding the war, he effectively blends both primary and secondary sources in a most engaging narrative. Sixty-three illustrations and four maps augment the narrative. The result is an excellent resource for both general audiences and specialists in Civil War and military history.