

Shelby Foote's Monumental Civil War Narrative

Shelby Foote (1916-2005) is in the American lexicon of the great southern writers. He spent most of his early career as a novelist. He was not trained as an historian. Foote was not known then as a writer in the same league as fellow Mississippian William Faulkner. But when celebrated editor of Random House, Bennett Cerf asked him in 1951 if he would write a narrative of the Civil War, he agreed to undertake the task.

The result must have both overwhelmed and tried the patience of Bennett when the book took twenty years to produce. It was undoubtedly Shelby's greatest life's work. There are three volumes of *The Civil War: A Narrative* – Fort Sumter to Perryville (840 pages), Fredericksburg to Meridian (988 pages) and Red River to Appomattox (1106 pages). Shelby said in an interview that this 1.2 million words represented more than half of the approximate two million words he had written in his lifetime – a 30 year writing career.

When Ken Burns produced his noted PBS Civil War documentary in 1990, he asked Shelby if he would serve as a moderator or maybe more, the soul of the series. Shelby again agreed. After that participation, Foote gained national renown and respect for his masterwork and novels.

His writing in *The Civil War: A Narrative* is strenuous in detail for the reader, and it must have been for him as well. He said that he produced merely 500 words per day on average. The only fault I found with it was that while it was organized with a table of contents and chapters, it lacked headings to keep the reader on track with the timeline and the battles. It is easy to get lost, even with keen attentiveness, and lose track of which general is referred to, which battle is taking place and who is doing what to whom.

There were indeed over 9000 battles in the Civil War, including major skirmishes and excluding picket fire. There were indeed hundreds of generals, more in the South than the North, coming and going in participation with the war. Every man, whether a West Pointer or a politician who raised a local militia, was made a Brigadier General, again more so in the South, which was the lowest rank of General. Oddly, the highest rank of General, below the Commanding General, was Lieutenant General while that sounds like a junior general.

As far as any potential bias Shelby may have had for the Confederacy, because of his beloved Mississippi Delta, he did his best to be even-handed and nearly succeeded. He kept advisors and editors to help him watch out for that potential problem.

Here is a paragraph from Shelby Foote's 3rd volume of his monumental Civil War Narrative I particularly enjoyed. His tongue-and-check humor shines through it.

“For once, by dint of hard marching on rural roads and steady pressure on the rebel rear, execution matched conception; the convergence would be offered by midday tomorrow, May 19, on schedule and with each of the three component armies in its assigned position for the final thrust, Schofield left, McPherson right, and Thomas center. The trouble was that Sherman, for all the speed and precision of his approach, was converging on a vacuum. Johnston was not at Kingston; he was at Cassville, five miles east, preparing to spring an ambush that would eliminate, or at any rate badly mangle, a solid third of the blue force

whose commander had at least afforded him the opportunity he had been awaiting ever since the campaign opened, two weeks and better than forty miles ago.”

Note that the paragraph is just two sentences. He wrote, as he contemplated, in long streams.

Time and again, Shelby tells how the battles rarely, nearly universally never, came off as the generals had carefully planned them. Unplanned rain and deep mud foiled marches and factions of brigades and corps were delayed to show up at the right place and time. Occasionally, a subordinate commander would get caught up in an unplanned skirmish or even disobey orders and set out in a different direction to follow his own smaller plan. It was most often pure happenstance that determined the outcomes of many battles. It is extraordinary that the war ever concluded. While the North was always the clear dominate power, it looked like the South would hold out forever.

Shelby is often quoted now because his quotes are interesting and insightful. To paraphrase him, he said that (despite the issue of slavery) this war was its own thing and that the truth is the facts we love.