



The Nature of Sacrifice: A Biography of Charles Russell Lowell, Jr., 1835-64

Carol Bundy

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Charles Russell Lowell, Jr., led a brief, intense life. Born in 1835 to a Boston family that for more than a century was a guiding force in the history of New England, Lowell died in 1864 at the battle of Cedar Creek, mortally wounded during the crucial Union victory there.

The Nature of Sacrifice offers a lively history of abolitionist Boston and of Lowell's remarkable family there; his grandfathers were each larger-than-life figures who represented quintessential Yankee elements of business brilliance and spiritual energy. Lowells were at the heart of the American Anti-Slavery Society; Louis Kossuth came to call at the Lowells' house; Longfellow and Emerson were family friends. But the unexpected bankruptcy of Charlie's father altered the family's fortunes, and before the son was out of Harvard, he had determined to redeem the family name.

After a bout with tuberculosis and a recuperative stay in Europe, Lowell turned to the business of making money. Soon after his return he went out West, involving himself in the vital new industry of railroading, until his career was interrupted by the outbreak of the Civil War.

The rich tapestry of Bundy's narrative shows the many threads that made this war such a climactic experience for Charlie Lowell, whose family and circle had, after all, been instrumental in fashioning it into a war against slavery. And Bundy masterfully demonstrates how Lowell was transformed as he served on General McClellan's staff, helped to form the fabled Massachusetts Fifty-fourth Regiment of black volunteers (led by his cousin Robert Gould Shaw), fought Colonel Mosby's guerrillas, and implemented Grant's ruthless strategy in Virginia. Lowell's years as a rising Union cavalry officer were shadowed by the battlefield deaths of his brother, cousins, and many friends. What were they dying for, and was the sacrifice worth it? For Lowell and his friends, a new concept of self-sacrifice evolved as they faced the horrors of war, and Lowell, who championed this principle in life, became in death his generation's symbol of American idealism in action.

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