

IN THE HANDS OF PROVIDENCE<sup>1</sup>REVIEWED BY MAJOR TIMOTHY C. MACDONNELL<sup>2</sup>

Reading *In the Hands of Providence* by Alice Rains Trulock is like eating a plain bagel. It is filling, it does not upset your stomach, and, although you are glad you read it, you are not quite satisfied. In support of this comment, this review first discusses the book's strengths and why it is worth reading. Next, this review explains where the author falters and why *In the Hands of Providence* is not fully satisfying.

*In the Hands of Providence* is worth reading, if for no other reason than its subject matter: Joshua Chamberlain. Chamberlain's life is more *compelling* than any novelist could create. His life is full of success, failure, and triumph of the human spirit. For readers with little or no knowledge of Chamberlain's life, *In the Hands of Providence* will leave them wondering how they had not heard more about Chamberlain before.

Most non-Civil War enthusiasts might know something about Chamberlain. This knowledge, however, will probably be limited to Chamberlain's conduct at the battle of Gettysburg. *In the Hands of Providence* will reveal to readers a man of stunning physical courage and integrity. Readers will gain a deeper respect and admiration for Chamberlain and for all those who fought in the Civil War. Readers will learn that Chamberlain went from lieutenant colonel to major general in three years with virtually no prior military training. They will learn that during the war Chamberlain suffered from heat stroke and malaria, had five horses shot out from under him, and was wounded at least six times. Finally, readers will learn about the challenges Chamberlain faced off the battlefield from stuttering as a child to the death of his own children. The value of gaining this knowledge is the greatest strength of the book.

Another strength of *In the Hands of Providence* is its balance. Too often history sees an individual for a brief moment, and that moment defines the individual's entire existence. Chamberlain was a hero. Bene-

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1. ALICE RAINS TRULOCK, *IN THE HANDS OF PROVIDENCE* (1992); 569 pages, \$37.50 (hardcover).

2. United States Army. Written while assigned as a student, 47th Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General's School, United States Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

dict Arnold was a traitor. Richard Nixon was a criminal. The author gives us a fuller look at Joshua Chamberlain's life. Trulock devotes over one third of her book to Chamberlain's life before and after the war. Of the 380 pages of text in *In the Hands of Providence*, the author devotes approximately 140 pages to Chamberlain's pre-war and post-war life.

Through reading Trulock's pre-war discussion of Chamberlain, readers gain an insight into Chamberlain's private life. They learn of his physically vigorous childhood growing up on a farm in Brewer, Maine. Readers learn of his mental discipline, which allowed him to overcome a stuttering problem and to be the "first class orator" at his graduation from Bowdoin College. They learn of his deep religious convictions and his commitment to the Union. The author's thoroughness allows readers to understand the life experiences Chamberlain drew upon to prepare him for war.

In Chamberlain's case, it is especially important to understand his early life experiences. This understanding enables readers to comprehend his successful military career. Any student of history can easily appreciate how Robert E. Lee or Ulysses S. Grant were successful military commanders. Both attended West Point, and both were veterans of the Mexican-American War. Understanding Chamberlain's success is more challenging. Chamberlain was a lieutenant colonel in a new regiment with virtually no military training. He successfully commanded in combat at the battalion and brigade level. By understanding the discipline Chamberlain tempered in his early life, readers can understand his ability to succeed with so little training in combat. Had the author not discussed Chamberlain's pre-war life, readers might have thought her accounts of Chamberlain's successes were inflated.

In contrast to the background provided in the pre-war pages, the value in reading about Chamberlain's post-war life is that it gives us "the rest of the story." Chamberlain's life should not be depicted as hero, war survivor, and happy veteran. Omitting a detailed discussion of Chamberlain's life after the end of the war would diminish the sacrifices he made for our country. Trulock talks about Chamberlain's post-war political career and life as a college professor. More importantly, she discusses his marital problems, his depression, his medical problems due to war injuries and the images of the war which haunted his post-war years, and the death of those

closest to Chamberlain. How Chamberlain weathered these challenges deepens the reader's respect for him.

These are the reasons to read *In the Hands of Providence*. Why then is the bagel not fully satisfying? The answer comes from three main criticisms of *In the Hands of Providence*. First, too much time is spent discussing irrelevant information, while too little time is spent discussing major battles. Second, the author fails to adequately explain major battles. Finally, the author's historical objectivity waivers in her treatment of Chamberlain.

To illustrate, readers will probably not be interested in the exact command configuration of the Fifth Corps of the Army of the Potomac.<sup>3</sup> The author spends too much time describing what brigade was temporarily transferred to what Corps for this minor battle, or that major road march. Most readers will not care about this information. The book is a biography of Joshua Chamberlain and the vast majority of troop movements described by the author provide little or no insight into his character.

Although the author explains in painful detail the various reconfigurations of the Army of the Potomac and its Fifth Corps, there is a lack of detail about the major battles in Chamberlain's military career. For example, the battle of Gettysburg is a defining moment in Chamberlain's military career. Yet in the chapter titled "Gettysburg," there are only nineteen pages of text devoted to the actual battle; eight pages are devoted to pictures.<sup>4</sup> Chamberlain's performance at Gettysburg is extraordinary and deserves more discussion than is provided. The author devotes more text to Chamberlain's command of the Appomatox surrender ceremony at the end of the war than she does to the battle of Gettysburg. This failure to distinguish between important and unimportant military information is surprising given the overall balance of Trulock's book.

War is chaos but books about war should not be chaos. The descriptions of battles in *In the Hands of Providence* are extremely confusing. It is as though the author is trying to describe battles all at once. At times the author begins describing one unit's position and situation, and then stops half way through and begins discussing another unit.<sup>5</sup> It is as though the

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3. *Id.* at 176.

4. *Id.* at 122, 125, 134-138, 140.

5. *Id.* at 201-03.

author is trying to describe the battle exactly as it unfolded on multiple fronts.

Much of the confusion surrounding the major battles described in *In The Hands of Providence* would be removed by detailed battle maps. There are forty-six historical photos in this book and only ten battle maps. Several of the historical photos are of individuals who had little to do with Chamberlain's life, leaving readers wondering "what's his picture doing here?" Because the battles are so fast paced and variable, one map per battle is not enough.

The final criticism of *In the Hands of Providence* is that the author's objectivity may have wavered. Joshua Chamberlain's life was extraordinary. So extraordinary that there is no need to overstate his positive qualities or gloss over his weaknesses; however, that seems to be an issue. By not dealing with Chamberlain's frailties as directly and honestly as his strengths, the author risks undermining the readers' confidence in the quality of the work.

An example of this waning objectivity is Trulock's treatment of the "drill rebellion."<sup>6</sup> In 1871 Chamberlain became the president of Bowdoin College, the same school he attended as an undergraduate and had taught at before the war. One of the many reforms Chamberlain instituted as president at Bowdoin was to include mandatory military science courses.

By 1871, Bowdoin required the student body to drill and take courses in the military sciences. Shortly after instituting this requirement, the entire student body signed a petition refusing to drill. Chamberlain responded by suspending the entire student body for ten days. After suspending the students, Chamberlain sent a letter to the parents of every student threatening expulsion if the students did not drill. In the end, all but three students returned to the school and drilled. Newspapers throughout New England reported the incident. The college formed a committee to investigate the incident and found Chamberlain's reaction to the crisis was inappropriate. The author does not seem to share this conclusion. She quotes one of the students who was involved in the incident as saying "of course we were wrong, and we all went back and submitted to the rule of the college."<sup>7</sup> Her only comment is: "The habit of command Chamberlain

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6. *Id.* at 345.

7. *Id.* at 347.

had acquired in the army may have emerged strongly in this crisis contributing to [the committee's] observations of his performance."<sup>8</sup>

Chamberlain's behavior in this incident is especially ironic because he was suspended from Bowdoin as an undergraduate. Chamberlain's suspension was due to his involvement in a drunken frolic with some fellow students. Although Chamberlain had not been drinking during this incident, he was present and admitted to his presence when asked by the college president. When the president asked Chamberlain who else was involved, he refused to tell him. Chamberlain was suspended for ten days (the punishment was never carried out). Chamberlain felt unjustly suspended because his refusal to tell the president who his co-actors were was based on scruples. The author points to Chamberlain's suspension as evidence of his strong character and honor.

Trulock makes no mention of the irony of Chamberlain suspending all the student body of the same college from which he was suspended as an undergraduate. She seems to not see how hypocritical Chamberlain appears to have been in this incident. Chamberlain thought it was a matter of honor to protect his delinquent classmates as an undergraduate, but he fails to see the issues of honor presented by the student body of Bowdoin. Chamberlain fails to see how the students might consider it a matter of honor to oppose compulsory military training as part of their college education.

Chamberlain's reaction was to threaten and expel anyone who did not yield to his will. His actions in the "drill rebellion" seem extreme. The author's failure to address Chamberlain's lapse in judgment in the "drill rebellion" may cause readers to wonder if the author is viewing Chamberlain critically enough.

Shortcomings aside, *In the Hands of Providence* is well worth reading. The author brings Chamberlain's whole life to light and shows how his courage off the battlefield is, in some ways, just as amazing as his courage on the battlefield. Joshua Chamberlain's life was amazing. His courage and honor are an inspiration to soldiers and civilians alike. Knowing more about Chamberlain makes reading this book worth while.

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8. *Id.* at 347.