McClellan as a Great Commander.*

The difficulties under which a democracy conducts war was epitomized in the career of General George B. McClellan, whose Life by General Peter S. Michie, the latest addition to Appletons' "Great Commanders" series, attains its greatest value, perhaps, not from what soldiers may learn from its pages as to the proper conduct of campaigns and battles, but from the warnings which McClellan's career gives to presidents, cabinets, bureau officers, and congresses, concerning what civilians in positions of authority and influence should not do. From the settlement of the colonies to the present time, we have never been long without war; and we have so persistently repeated, throughout our colonial and national existence — in the war of the Revolution, in the war of 1812, in the Civil War, and in the recent war with Spain — the error of civilian interference in the conduct of military affairs, that the record as it stands must be attributed less to ignorance of our own history, faulty logic, and hasty mistakes of judgment, than to the impatience of our people, our national traits of character, and our political and social institutions, which are little adapted to the making of war.

McClellan's career is enshrouded in such historical confusion that the sincere biographer, who seeks to account for it by a scientific consideration of all the elements of the case, attempts a most formidable undertaking; and perhaps no man who lived during the Civil War period, who has associated with the participants in the struggle, whose judgment has been influenced by the writings of the survivors of the conflict and disturbed by the conflicting reputations of the "great captains with their guns," can be expected to grapple with the task in a way thoroughly to satisfy logical readers of the correctness of the explanatory theory at which he may arrive. From the very number of the contentions in regard to McClellan's plans and achievements, it is necessary that his case should be considered freshly, with all the industry required to weigh the evidence, and by a mind gifted and trained in the analytical power of determining which is the vital piece of evidence in the mass of testimony, and what is the weight of the evidence. Much of the confusion and many of the conflicting claims in connection with the military careers of the Civil War are to be directly traced to a want of the analytical power often combined with that defective reasoning which Lord Kelvin has said has lost more vessels than have been sunk by faulty seamanship.

To the doubts and contentions hovering over all McClellan's career, the late General Michie endeavored to apply a simple and readily understood theory. To McClellan, this biography attributes every personal virtue, — high-mindedness, a noble and generous character, lofty patriotism, industry, mastery over details, great capacity for organization, fondness for the study of strategy. The book is also fair to McClellan in its enumeration of the personal and political difficulties with which the army commander had to contend. But it also taxes him with persistent exaggeration of the enemy's strength, with lack of aggressiveness, with timidity, and tactical incapacity. Let us consider some of McClellan's difficulties.

Called to the command of McDowell's defeated army and the troops at Washington immediately after the battle of Bull Run, and assigned to the task of making an army out of a mob, McClellan on the one hand was hindered by the presence of General Scott, who was still at the head of the regular army, and on the other hand by the ignorance of his staff and line officers. The amount of personal work thrown upon him in the organization of the Army of the Potomac, because of the absence of competent subordinate officers, was so prodigious that, strong as he was, he broke down physically under the burden. November 1, 1861, Scott was retired; and McClellan, becoming General-in-Chief, had to consider larger plans than those which related merely to the Army of the Potomac. The whole theatre of the war was under his direction. Very notable at this time was his desire to have General Buell march to the relief of the loyal people of Eastern Tennessee.

*General McClellan. By General Peter S. Michie. Illustrated. New York: D. Appleton & Co.

Early in the winter, McClellan was stricken with typhoid fever. Stanton succeeded Cameron as Secretary of War, and the attitude of the department changed from one of cordial support to one of hostility to the army commander. The Congressional Committee on the Conduct of the War, of which Wade and Chandler were the leading spirits, — a committee of whose star-chamber proceedings, of whose indictments, one-sided trials and convictions of prominent officers, it is difficult to condemn in terms of moderation, — was aggressively hostile to McClellan. The pressure of the politicians was for an immediate advance of the army, fit or unfit; and during the period of McClellan's illness in the early winter, the President, by consulting with several of McClellan's subordinates in the presence of Cabinet officers, tried to formulate by committee a plan of campaign at a season of the year which would have doomed any overland campaign to failure. On January 27, 1862, Mr. Lincoln ordered that a general movement of the Union forces be made on February 22; and for the same day the President ordered a movement of the Army of the Potomac upon the Orange and Alexandria railroad. Finally, Mr. Lincoln was persuaded to abandon his plan of campaign for McClellan's Peninsula plan. It may be said at this time that, coming to Washington in midsummer, McClellan had done everything that could be reasonably expected of him in the few months before the season of bad roads set in, and that thereafter nothing could be undertaken with any chance of success until the roads had again become passable. Had McClellan marched out to the Occoquan, in the fall of 1861, we may safely infer from the career of the Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston — which, from the beginning of his service along the Potomac in Virginia, on the Peninsula, in the Vicksburg campaign, and before Sherman, was uniformly and throughout one of retrogression — that the Confederates would simply have fallen back, and little would have been gained except the marching experience. It is General Michie's view, however, that McClellan should have made the movement.

By the spring of 1862, — that is, before there could be any reasonable hope of a successful general movement of McClellan's army, — the army commander's standing with the President had been so undermined that it was deemed necessary by McClellan, in order to win the President's consent to a movement by way of the Chesapeake Bay to Urbana on the Rappahannock River, that the plan should be submitted to the approval of his subordinate generals. The nature of the proposition sufficiently indicates the conditions which made it necessary, conditions under which no general could hope to conduct campaigns to a successful issue. On March 8, the President selected for him four corps commanders,—McDowell, Sumner, Heintzelman, and Keyes. Of the degree of capacity indicated and reputation made by these officers, it is sufficient to say that theirs are not among the great names of the war. Sumner and Heintzelman were already well advanced in years; Keyes was soon retired; and McDowell, like McClellan, had already suffered from being expected to do with raw volunteers that which only an organized and disciplined army could accomplish. The President also ordered that McClellan's movement should not be made without leaving in front of Washington a sufficient force for its protection, and that, this being done and the Potomac cleared of the foe, the movement should begin on March 18; and on March 11, the President relieved McClellan of all military departments outside of the Department of the Potomac, an act not calculated to increase the degree of confidence still felt in the General.

It seems now unfortunate that McClellan abandoned his Urbana plan for the movement up the Peninsula between the York and James Rivers, from Fort Monroe as a base. The movement from Urbana would certainly have resulted in the capture or quick retirement of Magruder's forces on the Peninsula below, and would probably have compelled the retirement of Johnston from the immediate vicinity of Washington. But as Johnston retired at this time, of his own volition, to the line of the Rappahannock, we have to consider chiefly the superiority of a movement threatening Magruder's rear, in contrast with the one actually made upon his front. What McClellan's motives were for the change, are not clear. He himself said that the Administration forced the change upon him. The present biographer does not accept this view, but he does not clear up the matter altogether. The confusion continued, not through McClellan's fault, when the General desired to make a flank movement up the York River for the purpose of turning the Confederate position at Yorktown and arriving quickly at West Point on the Richmond and York River Railroad, within thirty miles of Richmond. No adequate coöperation of the navy was arranged for or apparently contem-

plated by the authorities; and McClellan was left to make the best of the direct movement upon Magruder's front.

Once under way, McClellan was furnished with a map prepared by General Wool's topographical engineer, which failed entirely to show that the Warwick River ran across the Peninsula. Behind this stream McClellan found the Confederates entrenched. His own generals and his staff proved unequal to their positions. General Michie says that at Yorktown McClellan encountered the most critical moment in his career, — implying that he should have attacked promptly, instead of settling down to a siege. Undoubtedly he should have attacked. McClellan had much to learn about the practical handling of an army in front of a foe. He had had so far little opportunity to learn. But there is little more reason for considering Yorktown a critical moment in McClellan's career than for thinking Shiloh a critical moment in the careers of Grant and Sherman.

In spite of Yorktown, McClellan, with experience, with better corps commanders such as Meade picked out later for the same army, and with a staff such as Meade was enabled later to develope, might have run the glorious career of a successful general. That he could have rushed into Richmond with the army as it was in the spring of 1862, is not by any means made clear, even if we ignore the opposition of hurrying Confederate reinforcements. That McClellan was steadily improving as a commanding general is shown by his subsequent Antietam campaign, which, in spite of the serious blunder of a weak corps commander of whom McClellan said truly that he was only fitted to command a regiment, was highly successful.

The important question of McClellan's position astride the Chickahominy, and the other question whether the retirement to the James River was voluntary, or was forced upon him by Lee in part and in part was the result of his own timidity, are discussed with every disposition on the part of the biographer to be fair to the army commander; but it is difficult to avoid the impression that General Michie's appreciation of the tactical blunders of McClellan's army — blunders due largely to the lack of practical experience on the part of McClellan and his corps commanders, — and a certain impatience with the resulting faulty manœuvring in the face of the foe, prevented the biographer from giving due value to the soundness of McClellan's strategical plans. At the same period, and in the same campaign, tactical mistakes were made abundantly in Lee's army by Stonewall Jackson and other Confederate generals. In the Antietam campaign, Lee's strategical movements were of the most dangerous character. In the Gettysburg campaign, his tactics were faulty in the extreme; and, indeed, it was not until the last year of the war that Lee's tactics developed to the point where they would bear the severest scrutiny. McClellan had no such opportunity to learn the art of war.

With every disposition to be just toward the subject of his biography, General Michie early in his book, in his account of the Rich Mountain affair in West Virginia, indicates the attitude of disapproval which he steadily maintains toward all McClellan's movements in the field. Now McClellan's movement upon Rich Mountain was as well planned as Stonewall Jackson's flank march upon Hooker at Chancellorsville; although, of course, the battle at Rich Mountain was on much the smaller scale. But General Michie would take away much credit from McClellan, because it was Rosecrans who, by McClellan's orders, making the flanking movement on the right, discovered the theretofore unknown woods-road which led him to the Confederate flank unobserved. Inasmuch as in the older parts of our country, wherever extensive woods exist, woods-roads are also to be found, McClellan in strict equity cannot be deprived of the credit of his victory because his subordinate, acting under McClellan's orders and moving in the way that McClellan had directed him to go, was so conspicuous an element in the affair.

The presumption in favor of the idea that McClellan's right was extended on the north bank of the Chickahominy for the purpose of connecting with McDowell's force when the latter should move down from the Rappahannock, is so strong that, even if we did not have the emphatic statements of McClellan himself and his confidants in support of it, the minor evidence to the opposite effect does not appear sufficient to overthrow it. The unfortunate position of the army was due to two counteracting influences at work, — one being McClellan's desire to move to the James, and the other the desire of the civil authorities for a more or less direct covering of Washington. Lee's attack on McClellan's right set the Union commander free to go where he wanted to go. Lee's attack on the Pennsylvania Reserves at

Mechanicsville was made on June 26. But on the 18th McClellan had ordered supplies sent up the James. The movement to the James was already under way when Lee attacked at Mechanicsville, a Union victory which certainly gave McClellan no cause to hurry.

Nor does General Michie appear to give full value to the strategical importance of the battle of South Mountain, the turning-point in the Antietam campaign. The forcing of Turner's Pass was most skilfully and successfully done, and caused Lee to prepare for and consider an immediate retirement to Virginia. Considering the circumstances, the forcing of the mountain pass was promptly done. Lee's "lost orders," which came into McClellan's possession, placed at the pass a Confederate force sufficient to hold it against a host. As a matter of fact, a large part of this force had gone on toward Hagerstown; but of this, McClellan could have no knowledge. Even as it was, the Confederate force left at the pass was sufficient to prevent Cox from gaining the crest to the south of the pass, and Gibbon from making any headway in front of the pass. Meade's successful gaining of the crest by assault on the right compelled Lee to abandon the position. At Fairfield Pass, in July, 1863, a small Confederate rear-guard was sufficient to make so capable a corps commander as Sedgwick, with so large a force as the Sixth Corps, think that the pass could only be forced after long delay; and Sedgwick's decision has never been questioned. In the ensuing battle of Antietam — a wasteful engagement on Lee's part, and one fought after he had seen that his campaign of invasion had come to grief — McClellan only failed of a decisive tactical success because of the well-meaning Burnside's shortcomings as a corps commander. But even then, all the substantial results were with McClellan. Lee's scheme of invading Pennsylvania had been abandoned before. From being the aggressor, he had from South Mountain onward been upon the defensive; and he now abandoned the battle-field and returned to Virginia.

The obvious tactical errors in McClellan's battles — some of these errors due to untrained subordinates and inexperience in actual warfare — should not prevent a due appreciation of his comprehension of larger strategical problems. It looks now as if the greatest error in all his campaigns was committed by the civil authorities in bringing his army away from the James. General Lee never forgot what McClellan's threat pointed out to him, and before Grant's 1864 campaign was under way wrote to President Davis of the possibility that the Union forces might cut the Weldon Railroad and compel the evacuation of Petersburg and the downfall of Richmond.

General Michie suggests that longer experience might have eliminated McClellan's faults as a tactician, — a suggestion which will also be found in my earlier "Life of General Meade" in the same series. McClellan's claim to be remembered, according to his present biographer, will rest upon his organization of the Army of the Potomac, — a stupendous work, performed under many difficulties. Important as McClellan's work was, the organization of the Army of the Potomac did not reach a state approaching perfection until the spring of 1864, by which time the inadequate staff and corps commanders had been gotten rid of, and Meade's orders were elaborated by so able a chief of staff as Humphreys, and executed by such competent corps commanders as Hancock, Sedgwick, and Warren. But to the foundation of McClellan's claim to the gratitude of his country should be added his successful Antietam campaign, — the five most vital battles of the war (apart from sieges like the Siege of Vicksburg), being Gettysburg, South Mountain and Antietam (considered together), Nashville, Champion Hill (which decided that Pemberton should be shut up in Vicksburg), and Chattanooga. This list throws the names of Meade, McClellan, Thomas, and Grant, among Civil War generals, into prominence for having rendered the most conspicuous service to the Union in the hour of most vital need. Overshadowed by Gettysburg, — as it always will be, and justly, — still, the importance of the Antietam campaign will some day be better appreciated than it is now.

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