

Review

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Carl J. Guarneri. *Lincoln's Informer: Charles A. Dana and the Inside Story of the Union War*. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2019. Pp. 515.

There are no shortages of books or articles on the American Civil War, yet there are some aspects of our nation's most decisive epoch that have remained unexplored or underappreciated. Indeed, historians have offered scores of biographical studies on many of the war's most influential and acclaimed individuals—Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, William T. Sherman, Robert E. Lee, Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson. Still, some prominent individuals of the era lurk in historical obscurity or are reduced to oversimplifications. Charles A. Dana, a special informant to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, held a critically influential role in the Civil War but has garnered minimal attention in the scholarship or the nation's collective memory. In *Lincoln's Informer: Charles A. Dana and the Inside Story of the Union War*, Carl J. Guarneri, a professor at Saint Mary's College of California, seeks to restore Dana's prominent place in the Union war effort.

Guarneri offers a thoroughly researched and eminently readable biography of Charles Dana, focusing primarily on Dana's Civil War career. Concluding that “Dana didn't just record history; he made it,” Guarneri traces Dana's rise as managing editor of Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*, through his service to the War Department on campaign with Union armies in both the Western and Eastern Theaters, and his influence in shaping Washington politicians' thinking on the war effort and their generals (2).

In the 1850s, while at the *New York Tribune*, Dana forcefully criticized proslavery advocates and oriented the publication toward the Republican Party's free soil philosophy. After the firing on Fort Sumter in April 1861, Dana's writings eschewed peaceful solutions to secession in favor of military operations to restore the Union. When appropriate, Dana used his position with the *Tribune* to critique Lincoln's conduct of the war. Finding Lincoln's call for 75,000 volunteers in the wake of Fort Sumter inadequate, for instance, Dana urged the mobilization

of 500,000 troops, and on June 26 blazed the banner headline of the *Tribune* with the cry of "Forward to Richmond!!" (58). Dana's tenure at the *Tribune* came to an end when Greeley abruptly fired his managing editor, likely a result of uncompromising personality conflicts and differing opinions of General George McClellan.

As his 15-year career with the *Tribune* came to an end, Dana accepted a position as Secretary Stanton's ambassador to the Western Theater. On April 6, 1863, Dana arrived at General Grant's headquarters at Milliken's Bend, above Vicksburg, marking the beginning of a critically important relationship between the two men. Guarneri details this partnership and Dana's role in championing Grant's military career. Dana quickly became an integral part of Grant's inner circle. He shared the general's headquarters with him during the Vicksburg Campaign and, on July 4, 1863, entered the city with the victorious general. For his part, Grant found Dana useful. Dana's detailed reports to Washington freed Grant from such cumbersome paperwork, and the general trusted Dana's assessment and judgment. Dana helped to shape the general's image in critical ways. He consistently defended Grant against charges of drunkenness and freely covered up Grant's "Yazoo Bender." Here Guarneri suggests that Dana recognized that Grant was indispensable to Union victory. As a result, Guarneri argues that "Dana's cover-up saved Grant's job, and he kept a public silence about Grant's wartime drinking bouts for as long as the general lived" (140). Dana made a mark on Grant's career in other ways. He urged the Lincoln administration to place the general as the head of all Union armies in the Western Theater, a recommendation that Lincoln acted upon, and "helped smooth the way" to Grant's promotion to lieutenant general in February 1864 (234).

Dana's relationship with other Union generals, however, was not as fruitful. When Stanton dispatched Dana to Chattanooga in the fall of 1863, Dana became a vocal critic of General William Rosecrans. Guarneri acknowledges Dana's role in Rosecrans's removal, but concludes that "many Union figures shared responsibility for Rosecrans's fall" (192). Inevitably, Dana's role in the sacking of Rosecrans was contested, both at the time and by later generations. Predictably, Rosecrans's supporters charged Dana with meddling and doing the bidding of the Lincoln administration, while detractors of the general applauded Dana's role. Here Guarneri concludes that Dana's assessments of Rosecrans's limitations were grounded in objectivity. "It seems clear that Dana's warnings to Washington arose from a cool assessment of Rosecrans's actions more than from personal prejudice," Guarneri asserts (195). Rosecrans would not be the only Union general

who drew Dana's condemnation. On multiple occasions, Dana criticized the actions of General George G. Meade and recommended that the Pennsylvanian be replaced as commanding general of the Army of the Potomac. For instance, in the wake of Union victory at Gettysburg, and following the news of the Gettysburg Campaign from his location in Mississippi, Dana found Meade's pursuit of the Confederate forces sluggish. In 1864, Dana joined the Army of the Potomac for their maneuvers through Virginia in the Overland Campaign. Dana's estimation of the "Victor of Gettysburg" did not improve by personally witnessing Meade in command. He blamed Meade for the Union defeat at Cold Harbor and floundering assaults at Petersburg, stating that Meade was "deficient in all the elements of generalship" (289).

In January 1864, Lincoln appointed Dana as Stanton's second assistant, to receive a salary of \$3,000 per year. During the Overland Campaign, Dana sent approximately 120 telegrams to Washington, detailing the movement and progress of the army's drive to Richmond. The relationship between Dana and Grant that had originated in Mississippi the previous year only further bloomed in Virginia. To be sure, Grant's arrival in the Eastern Theater and position in the Army of the Potomac served to minimize Meade's position as the army's commanding general. While Dana was no champion of Meade, Guarneri argues that Dana's role in "squelching Meade" has been overstated (281). Guarneri notes that Dana objectively and fairly gave "ample space to Meade's opinions and reports, but Stanton regularly excised references to Meade and inserted additional attributions to Grant" (281). On the whole, Guarneri found Dana's battlefield reporting to be "clear and concise, enlivened by vivid detail and peppered with quick and decisive judgments" (2).

As the war drew to an end, Dana found himself in Washington tending to logistical matters. Thereafter his most critical contribution to the Union war effort came in assisting the War Department's efforts to capture the conspirators associated with Lincoln's assassination. During Reconstruction, Dana aligned himself with the Radical Republicans, urging strident measures to punish the South and implement measures to assure that Union victory gained on bloody battlefields was not lost in the postwar years. In the postwar years, Dana continued to champion Grant's military career and legacy. Their relationship was not without some discord, however. Dana disapproved of Grant's lenient treatment of Lee at Appomattox. And, for fiscal reasons, Dana opposed Grant's promotion to General of the Army.

After the Civil War, Dana returned to journalism and became the editor of the New York *Sun*, a Democratic newspaper. Dana wanted

his legacy to be found in his newspaper work in the postwar years. Guarneri suggests otherwise. Regardless of what the “proud newspaperman proclaimed,” Guarneri asserts, “the Civil War, not the Gilded Age, was Dana’s finest hour” (415).

There is no doubt that Carl Guarneri has offered the definitive treatment of Charles Dana. To be sure, Dana has remained a controversial figure in the scholarship, interpreted either as a contributor to Union victory or as an unnecessary meddler dispatched from Washington. Guarneri seems vested in redeeming Dana’s image and at times misses critical opportunities to scrutinize Dana’s actions or, indeed, question the influence that Dana held on Stanton and Lincoln. For a man who possessed no military experience, save what he read in texts on the American Revolution or the Napoleonic Wars, Dana evolved into an authoritative voice. How Dana emerged to wield such influence and sway (after a young adulthood spent at the commune Brook Farm) needs further exploration. Why did Lincoln so readily accept Dana’s counsel? Was Dana really best positioned to offer criticism on the Army of the Potomac’s pursuit in the days after the fight at Gettysburg from his position along the Mississippi River?

Additional analysis on the relationship between Dana and Stanton, and Dana and Lincoln, would add nuance to the life and influence of Charles Dana. Still, Guarneri’s work establishes Dana’s agency and challenges interpretations of Dana as more than Stanton’s lackey. In doing so, *Lincoln’s Informer* will force scholars to position Charles Dana as an influencer, or “informer,” to the Union war effort.