



Grant, by Ron Chernow
Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy, February 2018

Ron Chernow's latest biography *Grant* deftly explores the extraordinary life and times of our 18th President. Indeed, Ulysses S. Grant was a man full of contradictions. He was a brilliant military leader, but failed at business; he was a devoted family man who struggled with alcoholism. An honest and decent public servant, Grant presided over a scandal-riddled presidency. Chernow's fine account rehabilitates Grant's reputation while scaling back the myths surrounding him.

Born in Ohio, Ulysses was the first child of two ardent abolitionists. His father Jesse, a tanner, was loquacious, while his mother Hannah was reserved. A sensitive boy, Grant displayed an early affinity for horses. He was happiest when riding on horseback or plowing crops. When he displayed a dislike for his father's tannery, Jesse sought another career for his son. Without consulting the boy, Jesse applied for a West Point nomination for him. "My appointment was an accident," Grant later wrote. "My father had used his authority to make me go."

During Grant's time at West Point, the Academy introduced equestrian classes, in which he excelled. "In horsemanship, he was the most proficient at the Academy," noted his classmate James Longstreet, the future Confederate general. During the Civil War, many of Grant's West Point classmates would go onto high military positions on either side. (Grant was particularly impressed by William Tecumseh Sherman.) Upon graduation, Grant had hoped for a cavalry assignment, but inexplicably he had to settle for an infantry commission outside St. Louis. There, he visited his West Point roommate, Fred Dent, who had grown up on a plantation nearby. Dent introduced Grant to his sister Julia, who would marry Grant two years later. The Grants' happy marriage would sustain them during the travails ahead.

After disappointing assignments during the Mexican War and out west, Grant left the military and tried his hand at farming to support his growing family. He built a log cabin he dubbed Hardscrabble on the rented property he farmed. But after a

series of crop failures, Grant was forced to sell off his stock and farming equipment, and he had to find work where he could.

When Abraham Lincoln was elected president in April 1860, many southerners feared that his election would stem the spread of slavery into new territories and undermine their way of life. Starting with South Carolina in December 1860, eleven states voted to secede from the Union. As Chernow aptly notes, "The Civil War was about to rescue Grant from a dismal record of business failures. He not only had military skills, but believed wholeheartedly in the Union case."

Once he rejoined the Army, Grant quickly rose through the ranks, gaining a reputation as a brilliant commander and military strategist. Lincoln promoted Grant to lieutenant general and Commanding General of the Army in March 1864. Confederate General Robert E. Lee stubbornly pressed on, despite massive losses, until Grant presented him terms for surrender in April 1865. During their fateful meeting at Appomattox, striving to set the stage for postwar reconciliation, Grant offered terms more generous than Lee had expected.

Lauded as a national hero during the Reconstruction period, Grant served two terms as president, overseeing a corruption-marred administration. (He called the last day of his presidency "the happiest day of my life.") During a global tour, he and Julia were celebrated internationally. Curiously, Grant was inept in business dealings. In the mid-1880s, he invested his fortune in a Wall Street brokerage firm which turned out to be a Ponzi scheme, rendering Grant and his family penniless. At the same time, Grant was diagnosed with terminal throat cancer. Fearing that Julia would be impoverished, he set out to write his *Memoirs*, for which Mark Twain had secured a lucrative publishing deal. Enduring his last battle, Grant worked until the end, completing his *Memoirs* which became a financial success. Twain called the work a "literary masterpiece."

Ron Chernow's previous biography *Alexander Hamilton* was the inspiration for Lin-Manuel Miranda's blockbuster musical *Hamilton*. While it's unlikely that *Grant* will be turned into a Broadway show, it nevertheless is a tour de force, illuminating the life of a remarkable man. "Out of the hubbub of the war," wrote Walt Whitman, "Lincoln and Grant emerge, the towering majestic figures."