

Hardcover: US

Surprise Civil War ending comes three years early

Military historian John Keegan focuses on the big picture in his sweeping one-volume analysis of the deadliest conflict in US history

BY JOE MYSAK
BLOOMBERG

IN February 1862, General Ulysses S. Grant captured forts Henry and Donelson in Tennessee and won the American Civil War.

It took almost three more years and thousands of lives, but the capture of the two earthwork structures was key to all that came later, argues British historian John Keegan in *The American Civil War: A Military History*.

"Possession of the Tennessee River, if it were used correctly by the North, would give access to southern Tennessee, northern Alabama, and the upper Mississippi, and lend support to operations down the Mississippi River itself," Keegan writes. "The capture of Forts Henry and Donelson effectively marked the end of the opening stage of the Civil War in the West."

Surprised? I was. Most histories of the subject tend to rank the capture of the two forts as marking the emergence of Grant, and not much more. For many writers, and not just those with a sneaking admiration for various Confederate commanders, the Civil War is more of a close-run thing. You almost wonder how or even if the North won at all.

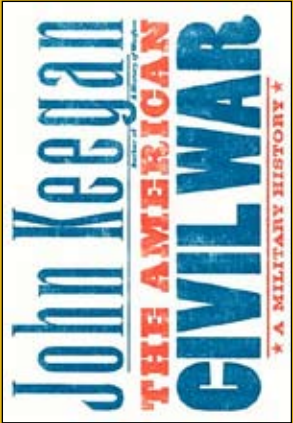
Keegan, a former lecturer at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, and author of such works as *A History of Warfare* (1993), *The Mask of Command* (1987) and *The Face of Battle* (1978), is a big-picture writer. He's more comfortable with the movements of armies and decisions by generals than with vignettes that romanticize people and places.

The overview format favored by Keegan is distinctly old-fashioned in a day when writers spend hundreds of pages on the heroics of a single engagement. The emphasis on the personal over the strategic has obscured the story of the war, which was essentially written with the North's successful blockade of Southern ports and the isolation of the Confederacy. The North's eventual victory was inevitable.

What this approach lacks in suspense, it makes up for in clarity and concision. Even buffs steeped in the subject will find value in Keegan's observations and conclusions, especially about the nature of battle.

For one thing, there were lots of them: 10,000 between 1861 and 1865. For another, they were often indecisive, chiefly because both sides lacked the cavalry and artillery that would have forced the issue. Finally, there was the question of terrain. Many of the bloodiest battles were fought in relatively confined areas marked by dense vegetation.

PUBLICATION NOTES



THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

BY JOHN KEEGAN
396 PAGES
KNOPF

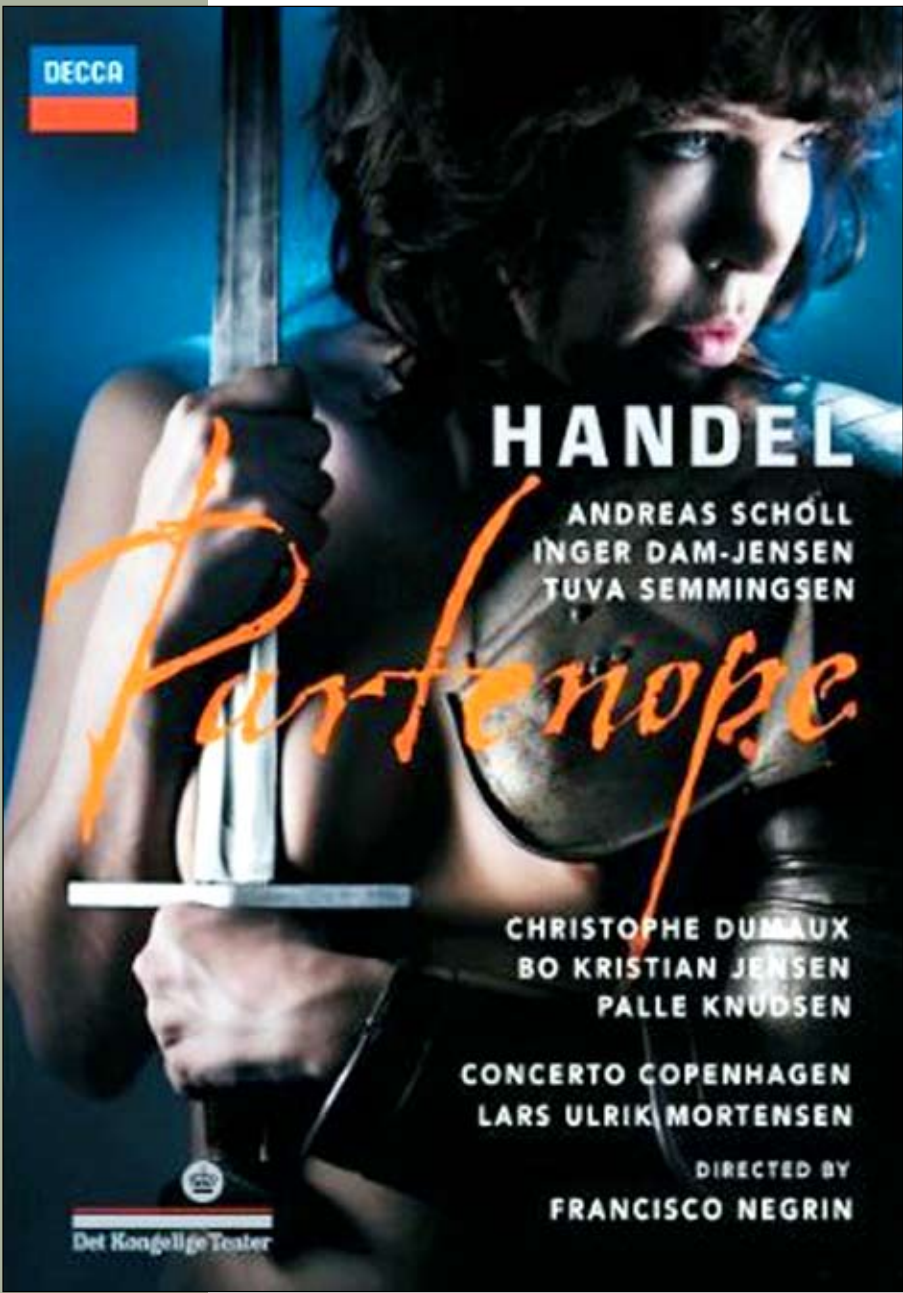
The reputation of General Grant has seen a revival in recent years, and Keegan is a partisan. He considers Grant "the greatest general of the war, one who would have excelled at any time in any army," followed by his friend and colleague William T. Sherman. He calls the Confederacy's Robert E. Lee "a gifted battle-winner" whose defects included a lack of boldness, excessive sensitivity to the feelings of his subordinates and a failure to insist upon his own judgment.

And then there's this, presented early on without elaboration: "The armies of the Civil War were the worst tailored of any great conflict, and the effect was heightened by the almost universal abandonment of shaving."

If *The American Civil War* has a defect, it is the book's less-than-chronological, sometimes jumbled narrative style.

Before the Appomattox finale, a grab-bag of chapters covers such subjects as black soldiers in the Union army, Walt Whitman and the quality of medical care, the war at sea, life on the home fronts and the obligatory "Could the South Have Survived?" Some of these chapters are compelling, even provocative, and yet here they seem presented as afterthoughts.

The one-volume approach is refreshing and, these days, unusual. Those who are looking for more can always go find full-length treatments of the *Iron Brigade*, or *Collis's Zouaves*.



PARTENOPE
Handel
Royal Danish Opera
Decca 074-3348-5

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

In a recent interview on Deutsche Welle TV, Kent Nagano, the Japanese American conductor who's music director of the Bavarian State Opera in Munich, was asked what his reaction was to the current resurgence of interest in opera.

I must say that any such resurgence was news to me. Nevertheless, I started wondering what kind of new audiences, judging by recent opera issues on DVD, might be drawn to the medium. Going by the proliferation of chic parties and generous libations of champagne in recent productions, I concluded that some of the newly affluent — young financiers and investment analysts, perhaps, anxious for something to mark them out from the still-struggling masses — might be involved.

So, as it's early in January, and still feels like a time for surveys and round-ups, I'll today look at one new DVD, and then go on to ask what opera DVDs all these newcomers to the genre, assuming they exist, should regard as must-sees.

The music that tends to receive the party-going treatment isn't the usual Verdi-Wagner-Puccini repertoire, but earlier, 18th century music — in other words, operas in the Baroque style. Certainly a new DVD of Handel's rarely performed *Partenope*, first seen in 1730, opens in just that style.

Partenope is meant to be a princess and the mythical founder of Naples, and we first hear her receiving supplications and hearing breathless messengers. But what we see is her in a modern setting, flouncing about on a table, watched by her fellow partygoers, glasses in hand.

The production originated at the Royal Danish Opera in Copenhagen, and was later seen in a concert version at

the Proms in London. The DVD dates from September last year, and thus contributed to events marking the 250th anniversary of the composer's death in 1759.

Andreas Schöll, singing in a high woman's register, is Arsace. Another character, Rosmira, is a woman disguised as a man (sung by Tuva Semningsen). Such anomalies were par for the course in early 18th century operas in which emasculated "castrati" played an important part. Today their roles are often taken by counter-tenors, and Schöll was dubbed the finest counter-tenor of his generation by *Opera News*. Tenor or baritone voices are relatively rare in this production — one of the best is Emilio, leader of the warlike Cumae (Bo Kristian Jensen). Partenope herself, a female character unambiguously played by a woman, is very strongly sung by Inger Dam Jensen.

In a bonus track the director, Francisco Negrin, and set and costume designer Louis Desire, discuss the production with none other than Andreas Schöll, here playing the part of interviewer. The view is expressed that perhaps Handel was trying out a new style, something lighter and more ironic than audiences had experienced in his heavily treated, myth-based "serious" operas. He may consequently have played with the operatic conventions of the day, and the director and costume designer take this as a go-ahead to play with the work even more. Thus a stage battle at one point becomes a game of musical chairs.

The supposed date of the production is timeless, says Desire, though it's clearly modern in essence. And Negrin describes how he's brought characters on stage who weren't there originally to help the soloists establish comic aspects to their roles. Quality comedy is harder to achieve than tragic drama, he points out, but the plus is that 18th century comedy has a lot in common with the present era — not taking sexual passion too seriously, and often ironic and playful, unlike the 19th century when comedy largely took a rest.

Musically attractive though it is, *Partenope*, or any Handel opera, is not where anyone newly curious about the art form should start. The Baroque 18th century is an acquired taste, whereas some of the more established classics are so powerful it's almost impossible not to fall for them on first acquaintance.

What opera DVDs, then, should be considered an essential beginner's library? I offer the following six as unreservedly recommended. None are new, and all have been previously reviewed in this column. Mozart's *Nozze di Figaro*, a film directed by Jean-Pierre Ponnelle with Hermann Prey and Mirella Freni (DGM 073-4034-9); Kenneth Branagh's World War I film version of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* (Lien Yin DVD-9 in Taiwan); Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg* with Ben Heppner, James Morris and Karita Mattila, on balance the finest opera DVD of all time (DGM 073-0949-0); Verdi's *Otello* with Renee Fleming and Plácido Domingo — as with the Wagner, from New York's Metropolitan Opera (DGM 073-0929-2); Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* with Ying Huang and Richard Troxell — Puccini's finest score, recommended less for the singing than for its effectiveness as a film: the treatment of the *Humming Chorus* is quite sensational (Columbia Tristar 05670); and Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* and Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*, two incomparable short films by Franco Zeffirelli, each starring the young Plácido Domingo, on one disc (DGM 073-4033-2). This is the top recommendation for a first-time-ever opera experience.

Asked who his favorite composer was, Nagano named Johann Sebastian Bach. Unfortunately Bach didn't write any operas.

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Any relation to biography is pure fiction (in a way)

Nobel and Booker prize winner J.M. Coetzee completes his trilogy of fictionalized autobiographies with 'Summertime'

BY KATHA POLLITT

NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

In *Boyhood* and *Youth*, the Nobel Prize-winning South African writer J.M. Coetzee gave memoir the freedom of fiction by employing a third-person narrator and the oddly distancing present tense. The results were unforgettably vivid, evoking with equal sharpness a tense, alienated childhood in Cape Town and floundering post-college years as a computer programmer and would-be poet in London.

Summertime continues the story into the early 1970s, with the methods reversed: Although most readers will assume the book is autobiographical, it's clearly labeled fiction, and the author, both as "John Coetzee" the character, and as omniscient narrator of that character's story, is dead. Literally. The intriguing book we have in our hands is a collage. Fragments from Coetzee's (or "John's") notebooks bookend five interviews conducted some time in the future by a young biographer, whose name is given only as Mr Vincent, with five people who knew Coetzee (or "John") around the time he was living with

his retired father in a Capetown suburb, teaching English, and writing, unbeknownst to most who knew him, his first two novels.

So what kind of a man was the secretive young writer? To his former lover Julia, he was "not fully human," "like a glass ball," sexually "autistic" — creepily, he insists that they make love by acting out the instrumental lines of Schubert's string quintet. His earth-motherly cousin Margot, with whom he shared an intense childhood bond, describes him as cold, possessing a "Mister Know-All smile" and uses an Afrikaner vulgarism meaning lacking in determination.

DISSATISFIED LOVERS

Adriana, a fiery Brazilian dancer, is still irritated to have been pursued by this "soft," unmanly man. Sophie, his colleague and lover at the university, is similarly underwhelmed: "I never had the feeling I was with an exceptional person, a truly exceptional human being."

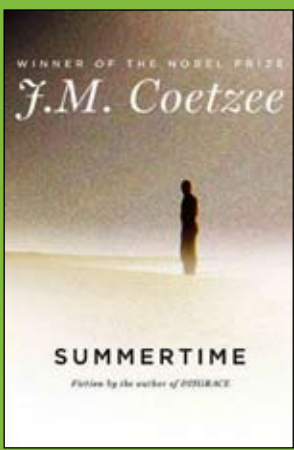
Another colleague, Martin, says of him that as a teacher, as a friend, "Something was always being held back."

Readers of Coetzee's books know what that something was: the fierce, bleak, imaginative life running in his head. The notebook fragments with which the book begins and ends give us the man the interviewees didn't know, the one who writes in the third-person voice, at once flat and intense and remorseful, of *Boyhood* and *Youth*. There, he portrays South Africa pitilessly: the staggering violence, the aridity and complacency of Afrikaner culture, the moral corruption of apartheid.

He tries to understand his inexpressive, dying father, who had so little satisfaction even in his prime — rugby, drinking, a record of Renata Tebaldi — and now has none at all. He makes notes for stories: "In the back page of his diary he makes lists. One of them is headed 'Ways of Doing Away with Oneself.' In the left-hand column he lists 'Methods,' in the right-hand column 'Drawbacks.'"

The barbed joke of *Summertime* is that the four women not only found the John they knew lacking as a person, they are also only mildly interested in his work. "I

PUBLICATION NOTES



BY J.M. COETZEE
266 PAGES
VIKING

prefer my books to have proper heroes and heroines, characters you can admire," Julia says.

"Yes, send it," Adriana tells Mr Vincent with a laugh when he offers to mail her a copy of *Foe*, whose heroine he thinks she inspired. She adds, "I am interested to see what this man of wood made of me."

Even when he was involved with the women, they had other preoccupations. Julia and Sophie had their bad marriages to deal with. Adriana was mourning her husband, gruesomely murdered in a break-in, and trying to keep her teenage daughters on the straight and narrow. Margot was struggling to keep her farm going as South Africa imploded.

John's insistence on laying his own concrete, badly, rather than hire a laborer contrasts tellingly with the simple humanity of Margot, who works all week as a hotel bookkeeper to pay her farm workers a decent wage. The human connections he finds unbearable — "My difficulty consists in not wanting to live with other people," he confesses

at one point — are what life for these women is all about. In different ways he failed them all.

RESISTANT MUSES

It's tempting to see *Summertime* as Coetzee's attempt to answer critics' charges of misogyny by offering a quartet of humorous, mature, strong female characters who haven't much use for their gloomy, self-absorbed author. One can also see them as resistant muses who upstage the writer by putting themselves at the center of a story that is supposed to be, after all, about him. Readers alert to writerly games about art and reality, however, will note that even if they are modeled after actual people, Julia and the rest are literary characters, the inventions of the novelist, who imagined for them the very qualities they think he does not possess.

So who, in the end, is pulling the rug out from under whom? Perhaps it is the mysterious Mr Vincent, who will take his research — "women's gossip," as the rather stuffy Martin calls it — and make yet another book, with yet another

partial, provisional truth.

Does it matter that few readers will realize that the supposedly autobiographical stratum on which *Summertime* is based is itself a fiction? Coetzee did not actually spend the early 1970s living with his widowed father in a tumbledown shack: He was a married man with two children and a mother still very much alive. I'm not sure why Coetzee gives us an invented past. Perhaps he is warning us against lazy assumptions about the connections between books and life, fiction and autobiography. After all, the book is obviously a novel, so why should the reader assume it accurately depicts the writer's life? Or does he assume that we know his biography as well as he does and are in on the game all along?

In any case, it's a mark of Coetzee's power as a storyteller that he makes a compelling, indeed, racing, narrative out of these hidden wheels within wheels. Even those who miss the intensity of *Boyhood* and *Youth* will find themselves turning pages as fast as they can.