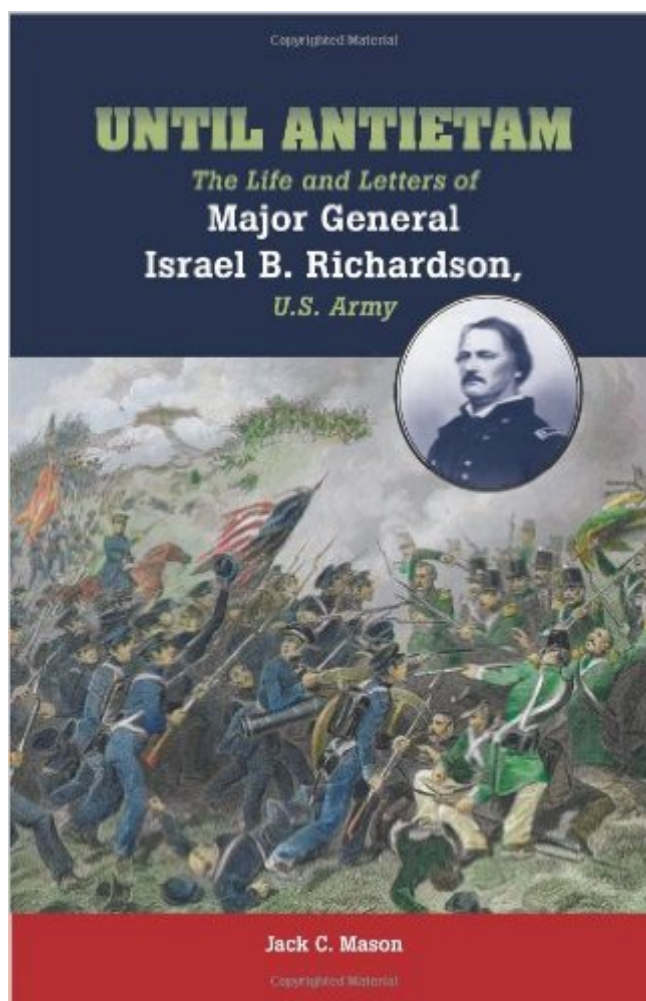


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Until Antietam: The Life And Letters Of Major General Israel B. Richardson, U.S. Army



Synopsis

While researching this book, Jack C. Mason made the kind of discovery that historians dream of. He found more than one-hundred unpublished and unknown letters from Union general Israel B. Richardson to his family, written from his time as a West Point cadet until the day before his fatal wounding at the Battle of Antietam, the bloodiest day in American history. Using these freshly uncovered primary sources as well as extensive research in secondary materials, Mason has written the first-ever biography of Israel Bush Richardson. Richardson's letters span more than twenty years of service in the U.S. Army. He served on the front lines of the Seminole War, chasing Indians through the swamps of Florida; fought in every important battle of the Mexican-American War, during which he distinguished himself by capturing a Mexican artillery piece and turning it against the enemy at the Battle of Cerro Gordo; guarded dangerous outposts in southwest New Mexico; and raised a regiment at the start of the Civil War that would become the 2nd Michigan. During the Civil War, Richardson fought at the First Battle of Bull Run, patrolled the area south of Washington, D.C., and led his division in the Peninsular Campaign. He rose quickly through the ranks of the Union Army over the first year of the war, as he was admired for his common sense, motivating leadership, and straightforward approach to combat. Mason traces Richardson's growth as a soldier, through his experiences and the guidance of his superiors, and then as a leader whose style reflected the actions of the former commanders he respected. Though he was a disciplinarian, Richardson took a relaxed attitude toward military rules, earning him the affection of his men. Unfortunately, his military career was cut short just as high-ranking officials began to recognize his aggressive leadership. He was mortally wounded while leading his men at Antietam and died on November 3, 1862. Until Antietam brings to life a talented and fearless Civil War infantry leader. Richardson's story, placed within the context of nineteenth-century warfare, exemplifies how one soldier's life influenced his commanders, his men, and the army as a whole.

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Customer Reviews

Until now, scholarship on the Maryland Campaign has not included a biography of Major General Israel B. Richardson, commander of the First Division of the Union Second Corps. Richardson played the key role on the Union side in the Sunken Road at the Battle of Antietam on September 17, 1862. He was mortally wounded there. Jack C. Mason has filled that void with this work.

Richardson was a rising star in the Army of the Potomac. His aggressive fighting style, outspokenness, gruff demeanor, and close connections to Michigan Senator Zachariah Chandler endeared him to the Radical Republicans. They increasingly saw Richardson, as a compelling alternative to the politically conservative and militarily cautious and orthodox George B. McClellan. Indeed, Mason submits that Lincoln's visit to Richardson's hospital bed after the battle amounts to almost a job interview for the Army of the Potomac top job. While we usually link McClellan's relief to the November 4 midterm elections, it may actually be connected to Richardson's death. It is an intriguing timeline. Richardson died on November 3, 1862. With hopes dashed that Richardson would recover so that he could name him as McClellan's replacement, Lincoln, two days later on November 5, 1862, relieved McClellan and named Ambrose Burnside to command the army. Mason offers this hypothesis for our consideration. The work is a very complete depiction of Richardson's military career. While based largely on his personal letters and an unpublished manuscript that he authored about his antebellum army career, it contains other very interesting sources and is well footnoted. It clearly paints the picture of Richardson as one of the most experienced small unit infantry commanders in the old army.

Finding a treasure trove of historical materials is the dream of every archivist, librarian and most authors (and it still happens from time to time). Jack Mason uncovered more than one hundred unpublished, letters from Union General Israel Richardson to his family. The previously unknown cache covers his career from his cadet days at West Point, service in Florida, Texas, Mexico, New Mexico and the Civil War up to the day before his fatal wounding at the Battle of Antietam on

September 17, 1862. Richardson was one of a number of career army officers who were graduates of the Military Academy at West Point, New York, during the 1830's and 1840's who remained in uniform and learned their craft in active campaigns large and small. This cadre of officers provided the leadership for the North and South during the Civil War. The level of leadership would certainly be cause for concern in some cases but Richardson was of the group that provided excellent leadership of combat troops, in his particular case, the infantry. His untimely death in 1862 leaves his potential role as commander in chief, Army of the Potomac, a matter of speculation. Richardson, a Vermont native, settled in Michigan after resigning from the army in the 1850's after a decade of active service. Returning from skirmishing with the Apaches throughout the Southwest, he settled down to do some farming near Pontiac, Michigan but the onset of the Civil War demanded his return to the colors. As Colonel of the Second Michigan Infantry, Richardson saw combat in nearly every engagement in the eastern theater of war and his experience and training led him to higher and more important commands, culminating in his promotion to Major General on July 4, 1862.

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