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Interview

'AN INSPIRATION THAT TRANSCENDS THE AGES': JAMES I. ROBERTSON JR. RECASTS STONEWALL JACKSON'S BIOGRAPHY FOR YOUNG ADULTS

Jewett, Leah Wood

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Civil War Book Review (cwbr): Your most recent book is Standing Like a Stone Wall: The Life of General Thomas J. Jackson (Atheneum Press, ISBN 068982419X, \$22.00 hardcover). How is Jackson's life relevant to young people today?

James I. Robertson jr. (jr): To me, Thomas J. Jackson is an inspiration that transcends the ages. His story is one of an orphan boy who grew up with pitifully little of the familial love so basic to life. By the power of his own will, he moved in 30 years from a shy, reticent child of the mountains to the most esteemed soldier in the world. Jackson's most famous statement, "You may be what ever you will resolve to be," can serve as a beacon for any child of any time. And he achieved all of that through an abiding belief in the power of a Supreme Being. Jackson truly epitomizes St. Paul's statement of a man who "fought the good fight and kept the faith."

cwbr: what motivates you to write books on the Civil War for young adults?

jr: Although my career as a historian has focused on scholarly examination of Civil War themes, I am a college professor with an increasing concern about the education of younger generations. It is painfully obvious that a large percentage of youngsters today are culturally illiterate. They have little knowledge of such subjects as history, English, and geography because those subjects are so poorly presented in school curricula. This is a dangerous situation; if our children have no culture, we will soon have no history.

cwbr: Is Standing Like a Stone Wall the book you wish you had read as a child?

jr: Good books for young readers were not in abundance during my youth. I was drawn to Civil War history by the writings of Douglas Southall Freeman, Bell Irvin Wiley, Bruce Catton, and Allan Nevins.

cwbr: what challenges did you face writing this book, as opposed to those encountered with Stonewall Jackson: The Man, The Soldier, The Legend (Simon & Schuster, ISBN 0028650646, \$19.95 softcover), which is written for an adult audience?

jr: A scholarly tome rests on research. A young reader's book also relies on research, but the quality of the narrative must be the strong point. A story not told well is a story of little value or use.

cwbr: Do you think that it is important for professional and academic historians to devote time to children's publications?

jr: I realize that I am a voice crying in the wilderness, but I feel it imperative for professional historians to take the time to impart an appreciation of history in young people. If the seeds are not planted early, the yield will be limited. So many Civil War buffs today are additions recruited in adulthood. Had the drama, color, and importance of the Civil War been inculcated at an earlier age, the love of history would have been deeper and America much the better for it. The one element that binds together all Americans is our history.