

### Gray Cavalier: The Life and Wars of General W.H.F. "Rooney" Lee

Robert A. Taylor

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## Review

Taylor, Robert A.

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**Daughtry, Mary Bandy** *Gray Cavalier: The Life and Wars of General W.H.F. "Rooney" Lee*. Da Capo Press, \$27.50 ISBN 306811731

Success in war and peace

Biography explores the life and service of Robert E. Lee's second son

W.H.F. Rooney Lee (1837-1891), Robert E. Lee's second son, served as one of the Confederacy's premier cavalry officers and compiled a fine battlefield record. However, Rooney Lee has long been overshadowed by his famous father and by being surrounded with the likes of J.E.B. Stuart and Wade Hampton. At long last author Mary Bandy Daughtry brings him out of the shadows with **Gray Cavalier: The Life and Wars of General W.H.F. Rooney Lee** and presents a credible biography of the man, his family, and the war that shattered their lives.

While unable to follow his father and older brother to West Point, young Rooney attended Harvard and then secured a direct commission as an infantry lieutenant. As the son and grandson of great soldiers the Virginian took to army life, but left after a short tour to marry and set up as a farmer. The drumbeats of approaching war lured him back into uniform in 1861, and he joined his father and relatives in Confederate gray. His martial skills deemed him worthy of a colonelcy and command of the Ninth Virginia Cavalry. Soon his well-trained regiment caught the eye of the legendary Stuart, under whom Col. Lee won his spurs as a rebel cavalry leader. He was a key participant in all of Stuart's exploits in 1862, and won a general's star and a brigade of his own by the end of the year. Army commander Lee, always careful not to show favoritism, was truly proud that his son had managed such achievements before his twenty-sixth birthday.

Despite such triumphs, the ongoing war took its toll on the newly minted brigadier. After suffering a wound in the 1863 cavalry clash at Brandy Station, he fell into enemy hands and faced the ordeal of being a prisoner of war. At one point during his incarceration General Lee was under the threat of summary

execution in retaliation for alleged Confederate treatment of Union prisoners. Fortunately the standoff between Union and Confederate officials ended before any hostages held by either side were put to death. Upon exchange Lee returned home to find that his wife had joined their two children in death. Unfortunately the pressures of war allowed little time for Rooney to grieve his loss.

When young Lee returned to the rebel army he found a promotion waiting for him courtesy of his commander Stuart, and a division to lead. Lee could not help but feel that the war was changing as the Union cavalry now fought with vigor, skill, and superior resources. While still managing success against the blue-clad riders, the cavalry arm declined on almost a monthly basis. Stuart's death in action and constant Yankee pressure from 1864 onward showed that defeat was on the horizon. When the end came at Appomattox, Rooney Lee faced it with his father, and became like the elder Lee an example of dignity and reconciliation for his men. And like his father Rooney faced the daunting challenge of making a new life out of the rubble of the Confederate South.

He would with little delay return to his White House farm and work the land with success. In time he found a new wife, began a new family, and even engaged in a political career. After serving in the Virginia statehouse and the United States Congress, Rooney Lee died a man of the antebellum era who evolved into a productive citizen of the post-war South. Again like his father he put the war behind him and went about the business of living to the best of his abilities.

Author Daughtry does a convincing job with a variety of sources to recreate Rooney's life and military career. But at times she makes the all too common mistake of letting her admiration for her subject slip into hero-worship. Also there is in some sections an over-dependence on long quotations to move the narrative along. Lastly several modern secondary sources are overlooked like Stephen W. Sears' *Chancellorsville* and surprisingly Emory Thomas' recent R.E. Lee biography. Since the author states that General Robert Lee was the single most important factor in shaping the life of his son, it is difficult to understand why the Thomas biography should be overlooked in this manner.

Such criticisms aside, **Gray Cavalier** paints a vivid picture of one of the Confederacy's most capable horse soldiers. It brings this skilled warrior to the forefront and gives him the attention that he deserves. Both scholars and lay readers will find much of interest in this solid biographical study.

*Robert A. Taylor is Associate Professor of History at the Florida Institute of Technology, and is the author or editor of several books on the Civil War era.*