

Diary of a Christian Soldier: Rufus Kinsley and the Civil War

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Review

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de la Cova, Antonio Rafael *Cuban Confederate General: The Life of Ambrosio Jose Gonzales*. University of South Carolina Press, \$59.95 ISBN 1570034966

Cuban freedom fighter

South Carolinian bombardier

In 1861, Mary Chesnut was immediately charmed by the protagonist of Rafl de la Cova's new book, noting in her diary that Cubans must be very nice if Señor Gonzales is a sample. His stories of fighting in another heroic (and losing) cause—that of his native Cuba—entranced her. His gift of a big black bottle of cherry brandy won her heart, in large part because of the foreign, pathetic, polite, highbred way he made the offering. In the end, Chesnut was more taken with Gonzales than with P.G.T. Beauregard, the Latin rebel Gonzales had initially called to Chesnut's mind. A subsequent bitter dispute with the Chesnuts' close friend Jefferson Davis alone seemed to prevent Gonzales from becoming the famous diarist's life-long confidante.

With an enormous amount of hard-won detail, de la Cova presents a full-blown account of this dashing Cuban Confederate Colonel, who has henceforth appeared as a bit-player, if he has appeared at all, in accounts of the American Civil War. We learn of his cosmopolitan background and of a Cuban boyhood interrupted by a short stay at a French Institute in New York City, when he began a life-long acquaintance with Beauregard. We follow his participation in the Cuban independence movements of the early 1850s, which earned Gonzales the distinction (later heralded by none other than Jose Marti) of being the first Cuban to bleed for the island's independence. We are informed about the shadowy world of revolutionary freemasonry (though here the evidence is more suggestive than conclusive). We also witness the transformation that followed Gonzales's marriage into the Elliott family of Beaufort, South Carolina. With this union, his appeal as an exotic foreigner was domesticated by a simultaneous membership in the slaveholding, genteel, and Protestant world of the Carolina

Low Country.

The Confederate chapters of the book contain the most detail, with de la Cova skillfully drawing from material in the National Archives as well as from personal archives and newspaper sources. Much of these three central chapters are devoted to Gonzales's military service, and especially to his work as an artillery commander in the defense of Charleston from federal assaults. His army record culminated in the November, 1864 Battle of Honey Hill when Gonzales successfully rebuffed the advance of a much larger enemy force. Given the course of the war by this point, the victory had less strategic than personal importance, burnishing Gonzales's reputation and assuring him post-bellum bragging rights.

The strength of de la Cova's book is his dogged tracing of sources that document Gonzales's odyssey, an approach that works best in those areas where there is a fairly narrow base of larger contexts, such as the account of the battle of Honey Hill, which occupies an entire chapter of the book. It works less well in his account of Gonzales during Reconstruction, when Gonzales's economic difficulties and his bitter estrangement from most of the Elliott family are considered from a Lost Cause perspective that is now dated. Missing here is recent scholarship about the nature of postbellum struggles in the Deep South, which might have helped put Gonzales's story in more meaningful perspective.

For some readers, who Gonzales knew and what causes he supported may be more interesting than the relatively little that he actually accomplished. His entry into elite southern circles during wartime was achieved only in part because of his associations with the planter elite. At least as important was the cosmopolitan glamour his service lent the Confederate cause, as his interaction with Chesnut and with others suggests. He was not the only figure who helped Southern rebels see their own struggle for independence as part of a larger tide of romantic nationalism. John Mitchel, the Irish patriot, advocate of the slave trade, and writer for the *Richmond Examiner* played a similar role, as did Gaspar Tochman, an émigré Pole who recruited Southern troops to fight a battle against despotism he had first confronted in Europe.

Gonzales probably knew that his earlier exploits against Spain helped stir Confederate imaginations. His example may also have made a difference at a later period for his three sons, who he suggestively named Ambrose, Narciso, and William. As de la Cova tells us in an epilogue that brings the story

full-circle, these brothers, who had made their name as founders of the Columbia newspaper, the *State*, helped accomplish shortly after their father's death something that he had set in motion. Each of them traveled to their Cuba in 1898, assuring at once the island's freedom from the Spanish empire and its future links with the United States to the North.

Robert Bonner is the author of Colors and Blood: Flag Passions of the Confederate South and is completing Southern Slaveholders and the Crisis of American Nationhood.