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Review

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Arthur, Anthony *General Jo Shelby's March..* Random House, \$26.00 ISBN 978-1-4000-6830-2

Riding with General Jo Shelby

Joseph Orville (Jo) Shelby (1830-1897) surely lived one of the most fascinating lives of anyone of his generation. A prosperous merchant and hemp farmer in western Missouri, he joined the border wars of Kansas after Jayhawkers burned down his sawmill, but his antebellum friends numbered future Unionists as well as Confederates. He turned down Frank Blair's offer of a Union commission to side with the Confederacy, rising to the rank of brigadier general. Leading what was later dubbed the "Iron Brigade," he proved one of the most able cavalymen in the Trans-Mississippi, fighting at Wilson's Creek, Pea Ridge, and Prairie Grove. But he became most noted for his repeated raids into Missouri, frequently cooperating with notorious bushwhackers and guerrilla forces under William Quantrill. This was an ugly contest and Shelby, his right arm crippled by a wound received at Helena, was often accused of violating military law, especially when it came to the proper treatment of captured African-American soldiers. With the defeat of the Confederacy, Shelby led some of his men in a quixotic venture into Mexico, cooperating with Maximilian's Imperial forces for a time and attempting to settle in Confederate colonies at Córdoba (between Veracruz and Mexico City) and the Tuxpan River (near the Gulf Coast one hundred miles north of Veracruz). With the collapse of these ventures, Shelby returned to Missouri, failing at several attempts to recoup his fortune but publicly professing his renewed loyalty to the federal government. His drunken testimony on behalf of Frank James helped clear the notorious bandit of murder charges in 1882, but President Grover Cleveland nevertheless named Shelby a U. S. Marshal in 1892.

The problem in treating Shelby, then, stems not from the lack of activity but the absence of reliable primary source documentation. Because fire destroyed

most of his personal papers, much that we believe about Shelby comes from two romantic memoirs by John Newman Edwards, his long-time assistant, which helped to transform Shelby and his men into the stuff of legend. Daniel O'Flaherty's sympathetic work, *General Jo Shelby, Undefeated Rebel* (1954), long served as the standard biography, supplemented in 1999 by a more a critical dissertation by Dallas Cothrum. Deryl P. Sellmeyer's solid and straightforward *Jo Shelby's Iron Brigade* (2007) now reigns as the most detailed account of the commander and his men.

Anthony Arthur, a former professor of literature and author of five books on history, culture, and politics, completed the present addition to the Shelby bookshelf just before his death. A vivid prose stylist with a penchant for extended forays into the backgrounds of his characters, Arthur deals with his subject matter as something of a historical adventure, breezing through Shelby's antebellum and Civil War years in three quick chapters. Heavily dependent upon the Edwards memoirs, the Shelby who emerges from the present volume is, not surprisingly, something of a romantic swashbuckler and entrepreneur, a "highly intelligent and idiosyncratic adventurer" who only occasionally indulged "in a moment of thoughtful reflection" (190). During the war, Arthur rightly identifies Shelby's skill in conducting fighting retreats, which became his "trademark" (31). He goes on to acknowledge that "Shelby's association with the guerrillas was more than casual," but nonetheless concludes--unconvincingly, in this reviewer's view--that criticisms of Shelby's actions at Marks' Mill, where more than one hundred African Americans were killed in a furious melee, are largely exaggerated (35).

Arthur's real focus is instead the two years of exile in Mexico, to which he devotes two-thirds of his book. Shelby, he insists, really wanted to go to the aid of Benito Juárez and the republicans, but instead deferred to the wishes of his men, who preferred to support the white-skinned European imperialists than the Mexicans. The fantasy of Maximilian's effort to control Mexico seems only slightly more unrealistic than Shelby's assurances that he could deliver enough American support to sustain him. Indeed, these eight chapters are indeed the book's real strength, for Arthur maintains a delicate balance between a healthy respect for his subject's apparently sincere efforts to make a life for himself and his family south of the border and the obvious futility of such a scheme. Plans shattered by the destruction of most of his property by guerrillas and Indians in 1867, Shelby returned to the United States and became, in Arthur's view, "almost in spite of himself, a commonsense progressive looking to the future" (199). As

marshal, he named a black man as one of his six deputies, and even denounced his own actions as a border ruffian in prewar Kansas.

Arthur was a skilled writer, and *General Jo Shelby's March* will be an enjoyable read for the general public. Civil War scholars, however, will still find Sellmeyer the more appropriate choice, for Arthur makes no claim to having located significant new source materials, seems not to have consulted the *Official Records*, and limits his citations to direct quotations.

Robert Wooster is a Regents Professor of History at Texas A&M; University-Corpus Christi. His most recent book is, The American Military Frontiers: The United States Army and the West, 1783-1903 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2009).