

The Perfect Lion: The Life and Death of Confederate Artillerist John Pelham

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Review

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Maxwell, Jerry H. *The Perfect Lion: The Life and Death of Confederate Artillerist John Pelham.* University of Alabama Press, \$49.95 ISBN 978-0-8173-1735-5

Fresh Biographical Sketch of Confederate Artillerist

Four books have now been written on Confederate artillerist John Pelham who, at the time of his death on March 18, 1863, following the battle of Kelly's Ford, Virginia, was but a major—a twenty-four year old major. Thousands of Civil War era figures that held higher rank have attracted far less biographical attention. Pelham, however, was an extraordinary individual and his was a remarkable story.

Born and raised in the hills of northeastern Alabama, John Pelham became accustomed to an outdoor style of living at an early age. He understood the land and acquired skills in hunting and horsemanship that would serve him well as a soldier. By the time Pelham entered West Point on July 1, 1856, at age seventeen, he stood six feet tall but weighed no more than one hundred and fifty pounds. He was quite handsome yet physically unimpressive. And though he looked frail, he possessed surprising strength and endurance. His classmates regarded him as the best athlete and equestrian at the academy. Furthermore, fellow cadet Adelbert Ames wrote that Pelham "was easily the most popular man in the Corps" (20).

Ames and Pelham were at the academy during troubled times. Increasing sectional tensions that divided the nation also divided the student body, ultimately forcing cadets to decide their allegiance, North or South. Pelham was within three weeks of his graduation when events in the South forced him to officially tender his resignation to Secretary of War Simon Cameron and offer his services to the Confederacy. Within three months John Pelham would find himself in the epicenter of the Civil War.

Jeb Stuart once remarked that Pelham was always in the right place at the right time. He made the most of his first opportunity when Captain Ephraim Alburdis, commander of the Alburdis Battery was too sick to lead his artillerymen into battle at First Manassas. Pelham, who had trained the men of the battery, led them in Alburdis's place and performed well with Stonewall Jackson and Joseph E. Johnston looking on approvingly. Afterwards, Pelham was promoted to captain and transferred to organize Stuart's "horse artillery". It was in this capacity that he won fame, which approached legendary status.

Pelham and Stuart were a perfect match. Henry B. McClellan who wrote *Life and Campaigns of Major-General J.E.B. Stuart* stated, "Two spirits more congenial than Stuart and Pelham never met on the field of battle. Stuart's fondness for the use of artillery was almost excessive; Pelham's skill in its management amounted to genius" (Charles G. Milham. *Gallant Pelham: American Extraordinary*. Washington, DC: Public Affairs Press, 1965, p. 6).

Pelham understood the complimentary role that a mobile artillery force had to play to protect the cavalry and to increase its effectiveness. He showed a rare ability to glance at the field before him and immediately determine the positions of greatest strategical importance. Inevitably, he occupied the best ground first. Once engaged in battle he led his men and managed his guns professionally and with a demeanor so calm yet so courageous that his men never doubted him despite his youth.

Under Stuart he served brilliantly in over sixty engagements but performed best when the stakes were highest. At Antietam he saved Lee's army from defeat when he solidified the Confederate left, holding Nicodemus Hill, fighting against two full Union corps and a portion of a third. Such service prompted Stonewall Jackson to state that he had never seen more skillful handling of guns. Then Jackson made his well-known declaration, "with a Pelham on each flank, I believe I could whip the world" (165). And later at Fredericksburg, Pelham had his guns placed so advantageously that, with a deadly enfilading fire, he halted Meade's advancing infantrymen and turned the advantage to the Confederates. An observing Robert E. Lee remarked, "It is glorious to see such courage in one so young" (254). Later in his official report, General Lee referred to the dashing young Alabamian as "the gallant Pelham." Today, in legend, John Pelham is known by that name.

Pelham's latest biographer, the late Jerry Maxwell, reported having had a fascination with his subject for nearly thirty years prior to the publication of *The Perfect Lion*. He had always promised his students that someday he would write a worthwhile biography on John Pelham and this book fulfills that pledge. Not surprisingly though, because Pelham has had three earlier biographers, there is little new information about him in Maxwell's study. Still, the book is important because the author has corrected several factual errors relating to Pelham. Plus he has performed a valuable service clarifying the circumstances surrounding his wounding and death.

Maxwell states in his preface that he intended to address two of the major deficiencies found in the earlier Pelham studies—brief bibliographies and a lack of footnoting. Unfortunately, problems still remain in both of these areas. Maxwell's bibliography is unnecessarily padded and his referencing notes are wanting. For example, several superb quotes are without citation. And on other occasions where there are citations, the author used secondary sources where primary sources were available. Basically, the book is very well researched but not very well documented.

Where Maxwell excels is in the use of supplemental information in his notes. There the reader gains an instant appreciation for the depth of research that went into the book. The supplemental notes would have been more valuable to the reader had they appeared on the page of citation rather than being buried at the end of the book as endnotes. The author is not to be blamed for the placement of the notes; the fault lies with the publisher. Nevertheless, separating the notes from the text is a huge inconvenience for research-oriented historians who like to peruse the author's notes at the same time they are reading his text.

These minor complaints notwithstanding, Jerry Maxwell has left us with a very well written, fast-paced narrative featuring one of the Confederacy's most celebrated young heroes. Professional scholars and amateur historians alike will enjoy reading this book.

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