

The Lost Papers of Confederate General John Bell Hood

Johnson Fred

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Review

Johnson Fred

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Hood, Stephen M. *The Lost Papers of Confederate General John Bell Hood*. Savas Beatie, \$32.95 ISBN 9781611211825

Reexamining John Bell Hood's Reputation

Regarding the ideology of the "Lost Cause" narrative that spread after the American Civil War (April 12, 1861 – April 9, 1865), the online *Encyclopedia of Alabama* states that "Historians describe the Lost Cause as a movement with three phases: bereavement, celebration, and finally, vindication."¹ One significant development of this "movement" occurred at the end of Reconstruction in 1877 when the "era of mourning turned into years of celebrating the Confederacy and its heroes, especially Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and Jefferson Davis."² In *The Lost Papers of Confederate General John Bell Hood*, author Stephen "Sam" Hood ends the mournful harm imposed upon his ancestor by conducting a robust re-examination of the General's private papers. As a result, the elder Hood's reputation is rehabilitated and another clarifying perspective is overlaid onto the strife that seized the United States during its Civil War.

In his first book, *John Bell Hood: The Rise, Fall, and Resurrection of a Confederate General* (Savas Beatie, 2013), Sam Hood corrected decades of historical error regarding his controversial kinsman by exposing "startlingly poor scholarship" through a "meticulous forensic study" of new evidence.³ Much of that evidence included documents written by John Bell Hood's contemporaries, and it confirmed the narrative penned by the General in his memoir, *Advance and Retreat: Personal Experiences in the United States and Confederate Armies*. The excellence of Sam Hood's work was formally recognized in 2014 when he won the prestigious Albert Castel Book Award and the Walt Whitman Civil War Award.

Early in *The Lost Papers* Sam Hood explains that there was no "perfect way to organize and present" the documents, so he categorized them by subject then

presented the information “chronologically within each chapter” (xix). Although this methodology resulted in some redundancy it nevertheless provided an accessible framework from which to examine General Hood’s Civil War record. While that record is certainly of importance, the documents also reveal the extent to which John Bell Hood, and other Civil War combatants, communicated during the postwar period as they doggedly sought information to not only defend their honor but, essentially, get the facts straight. Along with the massive compilation of data that became the *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*, the diligent fact-checking collaborations between former comrades and opponents and their subsequent individual publications, bequeathed to future historians, scholars, and enthusiasts a treasure of priceless information.

Sam Hood’s mission is clear and, at times, strident as he focuses upon correcting the smeared legacy that overshadowed General Hood from the end of the Civil War into the twenty-first century. Struck down by yellow fever in 1879 at age 48, John Bell Hood did not live to see the publication of *Advance and Retreat*.⁴ His untimely death robbed the General of the opportunity to engage in a long-term defense of himself, especially with regard to works like *Narrative of Military Operations* (1874) written by his bitter rival, General Joseph E. Johnston. Given the mischaracterizations that persisted down through the decades, General Hood could have used the time, especially since his reputation was under attack before the Civil War ended. After the conflict, the harm was exacerbated by evidence gaps that undermined Hood’s legacy of valor as “head of the acclaimed Texas Brigade . . . in Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia in 1862 and 1863” which not only “earned him (Hood) plaudits in the Confederate high command” but made him “a celebrity in Richmond society,” and a “genuine public hero” (1).

Sam Hood directly challenges the distortions, noting in the “Prologue” that since (for years) scholars and writers did not have access to the General’s “personal papers” they took great liberties in creating “an entirely false narrative around unfounded allegations of the most outrageous nature” (xxv). One of the most glaring allegations pertained to Hood’s supposed addiction to (the opiate) laudanum which, presumably, he became dependent upon for pain management after the substantial injury to his left arm during the Gettysburg campaign (July 1 – 4, 1863) and, especially, following the amputation of his right leg in the wake of the battle of Chickamauga (September 19 – 20, 1863).⁵

The allegations are strongly rebutted when Sam Hood examines the writings of Dr. John T. Darby who kept meticulous records as he supervised the General's recovery from his Gettysburg and Chickamauga wounds (19). Claims by historians regarding the subsequent uselessness of Hood's left arm are pitted against the eyewitness account of Dr. Darby who concluded that "the arm would get stronger and . . . the hand would lose little of its function" (20). Regarding Hood's alleged laudanum addiction, Sam Hood stresses that this issue stands out as "perhaps the most significant generally accepted 'fact' to be refuted by Dr. Darby's extensive detailed reports" (21). Placed against the backdrop of the disastrous circumstances that befell the Army of Tennessee in 1864, after John Bell Hood assumed command from General Joseph E. Johnston, the claim that opiate addiction was responsible for his (Hood's) poor performance heightens the value of Dr. Darby's medical reports as a refutation.

It's not surprising that two men who possessed such divergent views of war fighting disagreed over the tumultuous events regarding the Confederacy's failure to hold Atlanta. The more reserved Johnston preferred to avoid battle and struck "only when the odds were heavily in his favor" whereas Hood preferred "holding Atlanta with part of his army" and attacking his Union enemy when opportunity allowed (53-54). The power of the information offered in *The Lost Papers* is exemplified by the commentary of Matthew C. Butler who, in writing to Hood on July 18, 1874 noted that, while he had "great respect" for Johnston's "personal character and great abilities," he (Butler) could not honestly say that Johnston "was one of the ablest generals of the time" (67). Of course, Hood and Johnston had their supporters and detractors, but with the addition of Hood's lost papers the errors of the detractors have been called into question. Conversely, the General's supporters have risen in stature as credible expositors of reliable facts, irrespective of their loyalties to the General.

As with other personal collections, *The Lost Papers* offers a golden opportunity to explore the lives and evolving relationships between former combatants as the postwar years gathered in number. A February 21, 1875 letter from the General to his wife, Anna, specifically mentioned that General (William T.) Sherman "called last evening and paid me (Hood) quite a long visit. He asked me to dine to day but my being engaged forbade my so doing" (168). While Hood and Sherman were not the only former opponents who sought each other out during peacetime their rapprochement after such fierce fighting, just slightly more than a decade earlier, underscores the power of the transcending bonds that survived the brutality of civil war.

The Lost Papers also provides a candid look into the postwar challenges and setbacks faced by General Hood. During the War, his star blazed bright, even in controversy. Afterward, his body ached and his finances were troubled, heightening his desire to take solace in loving, and being loved, by his wife and children. In a January 13, 1878 letter (written from Washington, D. C.) to Anna, the twin concerns of family and finance converged when Hood shared that General Sherman had introduced him to a number of power brokers. Along with other business, Hood wanted to see if he could get his papers “valued (i.e., sold) for 20,000 (181).”

Sam Hood’s skillful use of *The Lost Papers of Confederate General John Bell Hood* goes far in debunking the historical errors pertaining to the elder Hood. The range and variety of sources testifies to the diligent, skilled talent invested into the project. Although the author largely succeeds in positively recasting the image of his distant relative, the urgency applied in defending General Hood possesses an occasional undertone of zealotry. Nevertheless, *The Lost Papers* revives a valiant warrior’s reputation and cautions scholars and enthusiasts to remember that historical truth, while often elusive, is always worth the pursuit.

Fred Johnson is an Associate Professor of History at Hope College in Holland, MI.

¹See the following URL: <http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-1643>. The Encyclopedia of Alabama is a free, online data source pertaining to “Alabama’s history, culture, geography, and natural environment.” Its mission is to “present trustworthy and authoritative information on a wide range of topics.”

²Ibid.

³See: www.savasbeatie.com. Savas Beatie, LLC refers to itself as a Publisher of Historical Titles of Distinction.

⁴Note: the original manuscript was published in 1880.

⁵Stephen M. Hood notes that Confederate Surgeon John Thompson Darby “prepared two detailed medical reports concerning wounds sustained by John Bell Hood.” The first wound was to Hood’s left arm and occurred on day two at Gettysburg (July 2, 1863). The second wound took place on September 20, 1863 during the Chickamauga battle and resulted in the amputation of Hood’s right leg.