

A Rebel War Clerk's Diary: At the Confederate States Capital, Vols. 1 and 2

Minoa D. Uffelman

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Recommended Citation

Uffelman, Minoa D. (2016) "A Rebel War Clerk's Diary: At the Confederate States Capital, Vols. 1 and 2," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.18.2.08

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol18/iss2/7>

Review

Uffelman, Minoa D.

Spring 2016

Jones, J.B. and Robertson, James I. Jr.. *A Rebel War Clerk's Diary: At the Confederate States Capital, Vols. 1 and 2.* University Press of Kansas, \$45.00 (Vol. 1), \$50.00 (Vol. 2) ISBN 9780700621231 & 9780700621248

Skillful Insight into the Life of an Ordinary Citizen of the Confederacy

It is not often a book is published and becomes an instant classic and immediately in the canon. To be more accurate, *A Rebel War Clerk's Diary* is two volumes and this is the fourth edition to be published, however this edition is a seminal primary source now accessible to scholars and the general reader. Historians have plumbed old editions of Jones' diary for generations but this edition by James I. Robertson, Jr, Alumni Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Virginia Tech, is superb. Robertson is the author or editor of twenty books about the Civil War and he brings his lifetime of knowledge to bear to create this outstanding edition complete with expansive citations and a useful index. This edition will be a standard primary source for every scholar and student of the Civil War.

John Beauchamp Jones (1810-1866) was a successful novelist and journalist. With deep southern sympathies he cast his lot with the Confederacy, working as a senior clerk in the passport office of the Confederate War Department in Richmond, Virginia. With plans to publishing his diary, Jones kept a comprehensive first-hand account of the new nation from the hopeful beginning to the depressing and desperate end. It is the only comprehensive eyewitness account of the inner workings of the Confederacy. Jones was at the center of events and privy to privileged information and confidential documents. He knew of debates about military planning, and he heard and recorded rumors. His account anticipated by a quarter century the *OR, War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. Indeed, Jones pages contain verbatim copies of dispatches and official records that did not appear in print until the *OR*.

Jones, knowing he was too old to soldier admitted, “those physically incapable of wielding the bayonet and the sword must wield the pen” (Vol. I, 10). He began his journal describing his wife cheerfully packing his trunk. He arrived in Richmond full of excitement and optimism for a short lived war. His entries connect the southern rebellion with the noble cause of the American Revolution. He wrote of seeing his first secession flag and later of how Richmond women were busy sewing more flags. Richmond was overrun with soldiers who drilled throughout the city and he constantly heard martial music. As the months progress he grimly recounts the southerners sinking morale and rising of prices. His final entries reveal the grim dismal days for defeated southerners as they await their uncertain future.

Jones not only wrote of the internal struggles between the Confederate president and congress but also conflicts between the president and military officers, as well as, squabbles between states. He recorded the ever higher and higher prices of food and products and chronicled rising inflation that rendered the Confederate dollar worthless. Eventually he wrote of the scarcity of food and essentials, his insufficient income and the black market. He described contrabands, deserters, spies and their executions, and social events. He recorded military campaigns, battles and their outcomes, as well as, the weather. Significantly, he acknowledged the increasingly bad morale of once enthusiastic Confederates.

As a successful novelist and journalist with an eye for important details and intent on publishing his account, his writing is clear and comprehensive. While he himself titled the book a diary, its polished sentences, correct grammar and punctuation have an edited feel that most diaries do not. Just because it was well written does not mean it was objective. Clearly, a history of the Confederacy written by a true believer in the cause of southern nationhood and the preservation of slavery was not unbiased. Today, more than one hundred and fifty years since the end of the war, readers understand that biases do not render primary sources invalid. Indeed, Jones’ animus was not just against Yankees but include harsh opinions of Confederate politicians, military officers, Jews, Catholics and immigrants. His prejudices were typical of people of his class and region.

Jones was born in Baltimore in 1810. He bought a Baltimore newspaper and serialized his novel, *Wild Western Scenes* which he later self-published. It proved to be popular with the reading public. He married-up to a well-connected

woman, named Sally Parsons who was Virginia aristocracy. Jones, who had brains, a work ethic but no money or connections could now hob nob with Virginia elite. He became the editor of John Tyler's political newspaper, developing his southern loyalties and on the side, writing anti-Quaker and anti-Catholic novels. At his own expense he established a southern leaning newspaper as he also wrote an anti-northern novel complete with abolitionists as villains published in 1859.

Jones may have been too old to join the military but he was no sunshine patriot. He devoted his life, family, and fortune to the rebel cause. He sent his beloved wife to live with relatives because of the hardships of Richmond. As the war progressed life became harder and he often went hungry and he recorded his weight loss. On his fifty-third birthday he wrote of his advancing age and his hope for the future. "I desire to live after this war is over, if it be the will of God—if not, I hope to exist in a better world" (Vol. 1, 239). Jones lived only short time after the war, he had he contracted tuberculosis and in 1866 after spending the last few months of his life editing the diary for publication. Soon after his death, Lippincott published the two volumes though sales were disappointing. Northerners were not interested in reading the about the inner workings of the treasonous government they had just defeated at such unimaginable costs. The book did not appeal to southerners who at the end of the war immediately began to embrace the Myth of the Lost Cause. Jones' critical accounts of southern politicians and officers did not conform to the notion of a noble cause based on selfless sacrifice. In 1935 Howard Swiggett printed a boxed set with a poor introduction and too few footnotes that were filled with errors. Vanderbilt historian Frank L Owsley reviewed this edition for the *Journal of Southern History* where he praised the comprehensive content of the diary while criticizing the numerous editing errors. Owsley notes the "self-righteous tone and the lack of self-criticism" but adds "the diary will readily be seen to be the best bird's-eye view of the confederacy written at the time or since. This pathetic little figure at the center of the great revolution recorded the struggle as a whole." (*JSH* Vol.1 No. 3, 402-404) Perhaps Jones was pathetic, he was certainly prejudiced and held views repugnant today but he was also a dedicated government functionary whose devotion to his failed country cost him dearly both financially and with his ruined health. Regardless of our views of him, Jones left us an incredible record filled with fascinating details of the turbulent war years. We all know that being of noble character is not a requirement for inclusion in the archives.

As with all diaries, this writer commented on what was of greatest interest to himself at the moment and he may not or perhaps could not have grasp the significance of the events at the time. For instance, with the fall of Fort Henry and Fort Donelson and Union gained control the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers. Leading to the loss of the first Confederate state capitol, Nashville. We now know this was the beginning of the end for the CSA. Jones dutifully notes the disastrous news along with figures of lost troops, yet he spends the bulk of the entry writing about Davis' Inaugural Reception and how he feared if attendance was low it could have been a point of ridicule in the northern newspapers. Today no one is concerned with the turn out for the reception but scholarship is examining the significance of these loses on the western front. These types of disconnects certainly do not render the diary less valuable but instead give insight to concerns of one person who had his finger on the pulse of the creation of the CSA and concerns about bad public relations of the fledgling Confederate government.

Scholars will use this diary to bolster arguments in current historical debates. The existence of Confederate African American soldiers is unequivocally denied by Jones. "The Northern journalists say we have negro regiments on the Rappahannock and the West. This is utterly untrue. We have no armed slaves to fight for us, nor do we fear a servile insurrection. We are at a loss, however, to interpret the meaning of such demonic misrepresentations" (247).

Diarists sometimes record information that they have heard or believe to be true but later proves not accurate. One will be surprised to read on April 9, 1865, "I hear that Gen. Pickett was killed in the recent battle!" (Vol. II, 428) Robertson's sets the record straight with this endnote complete with slyly insightful commentary, "Pickett was dead only in the sense that, after his April 1 failure at the battle of Five Forks, Lee would have nothing to do with him on the road to Appomattox" (563). Robertson's over 2,700 footnotes are a marvel as they place the entries into context, cite primary and secondary sources, explain mistakes, analyze comments and information that Jones added later as he could not have known at the time he was writing.

J. B. Jones' had imagined *A Rebel War Clerk's Diary* as his magnum opus. Today over a century and a half since it was first published it has become the important historical account he imagined and that is because of historian James L. Robertson, Jr. This is his *editing* magnum opus. These two magnificently

edited volumes will place history in the hands of every student and scholar interested in the many aspects of the war. Robertson wrote an excellent introduction providing biographical information of J. B. Jones describing his life experiences that positioned him at age 50 to use his talents and skills to work for the Confederate government and to write his experiences and record the failed nation's short history in prodigious tome. Robertson's rich and expansive endnotes are invaluable for scholars. Volume I contains entries from April 1861 to July 1863 and Volume II contains August 1863 to April 1865 and the books are divided into easy to reference chapters of one month in length.

On the final page Jones understatedly wrote, "I never swore allegiance to the Confederate States Government, but was true to it." (Vol. II, 434) Yes, he was true, in belief and in deed. Because he thought the history of the CSA was worth recording, *A Rebel War Clerk's Diary* provides invaluable insights into the Confederacy from the beginning to the end.

Minoa D. Uffelman is Associate Professor at Austin Peay State University. She co-edited, Nannie Haskins Williams: A Southern Woman's Story of Rebellion and Reconstruction, 1863-1890. Her articles include "Tomato Clubs as Salvation: Canning Club for Girls and the Uplift of Southern Rural Society" in Tennessee Women in the Progressive Era, "Homer Plessy, Civil Rights Activists," in The Human Tradition in the Civil Rights Movement and "Agriculture History is American History" in History of Rural America. Her current project is editing the Civil War diary of Serepta Jordan of Clarksville, Tennessee.