

Lee and His Generals: Essays in Honor of T. Harry Williams

Adam Pratt

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Pratt, Adam (2013) "Lee and His Generals: Essays in Honor of T. Harry Williams," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 15 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.15.2.07

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol15/iss2/5>

Review

Pratt, Adam

Spring 2013

Hewitt, Lawrence Lee and Schott, Thomas E.. *Lee and His Generals: Essays in Honor of T. Harry Williams*. University of Tennessee Press, \$45.95 ISBN 978-1-57233-850-0

Remembering the Scholarship of a Great Historian

T. Harry Williams' shadow looms large at Louisiana State University, where he taught for nearly thirty-eight years. His successful publications allowed him to fund an oral history center, and graduate students in the history department still covet his eponymous dissertation year fellowship. Not only that, but his colleagues are quick to recount stories of his wit, his sharp, analytical mind, and his engaging, dynamic lectures. Williams was also generous with his time, whether to new faculty or his legion of graduate students. It is fitting, then, that many of his former students have published a posthumous *Gedenkschrift* for their mentor, *Lee and His Generals*.

In the eleven essays published in this volume, ten of his former students, along with Brian Holden Reid, have contributed to a volume that shows the profound influence that Williams had on the minds of a generation of Civil War historians. Bookended by two essays about his life and career, *Lee and His Generals* is unusual in that it spends so much time discussing Williams and his professional and personal impact. The opening essay by Frank Wetta paints Williams as a pragmatist when it comes to the practice of history. Nowhere was this more visible than in Williams' views on the differences between academics and politicians. "The professors have thought that the politicians should act much like themselves: debating issues with calm, balance, and scholarly restraint; presenting plans of doctrine, detail, and logic; acting, in short, like sweet philosophers" (7). Such observations were not lost on his students, nor on close readers of his work. Roger Spiller's final essay on his mentor locates Williams, a Midwesterner through and through, as a Union man who permanently occupied Rebel ground. That loyalty came through in his work, and

led him to critique so large a figure as Robert E. Lee, whom Williams criticized for his seeming inability to draw important lessons from combat or to look beyond Virginia for strategic importance.

Williams' views on Lee have come under attack, most notably by his former student Charles Roland, who sought to reconfigure Williams' often unfounded criticism of Lee's strategic shortcomings. Though printed elsewhere, Roland's essay on Lee's generalship, offers readers a corrective, though flawed in its own ways, to Williams' unflinching portrayal of Lee. Roland admits that Lee "sometimes admitted control to drift," as it did at Gettysburg, but credits the general for his prowess, which "came largely of a readiness to accept the risk of action" (43-44). And others aside from Roland came to the defense of the Virginian. Those historiographical shifts are expertly charted in Brian Holden Reid's marvelous essay on Lee's evolving reputation in the historical community. Reid traces nearly five decades of scholarship that shows how historians, at least since the 1990s, have come to accept Lee's skill as a commander, but remain critical of his war-making, perhaps, in the end, because he experienced defeat.

The remaining seven essays in this volume tack away from Lee and towards his generals. Although most of the usual suspects appear—Beauregard, Stuart, and Stonewall—some excised Confederates have their reputations rehabilitated. A. Wilson Greene analyzes P.G.T. Beauregard's role in the Petersburg Campaign and concludes that the Louisiana Creole played an important role in defending Petersburg, especially in the first three days of the conflict when Beauregard acted independently. Lawrence Hewitt explores the virtues of "Fighting Dick" Anderson, who he claims as Lee's most maligned and least remembered corps commanders. Hewitt presents a detailed account of Anderson's career, from his early victory at Williamsburg to more serious disagreements with Jubal Early over the command and conduct of operations in the Shenandoah in 1864. In Hewitt's opinion, Anderson has received such uneven treatment because Lee removed him of command, but points out that Jubal Early met the same fate though has been regarded more favorably, perhaps because of the latter's vociferous defense of Lost Cause-ism. Speaking of Early, Thomas E. Schott shows how an unreconstructed Old Jube "render[ed] far better service to the Confederate States than he ever did in a major general's uniform" [229]. In vivid prose, Schott paints an unflattering picture of Early as an errant expatriate who harbored deep grudges against the Union in the years after the war; a man whose wanderings came to an end in the spring of 1869 when he

returned home to Virginia, but whose vitriol had not been spent. "Like some prehistoric insect preserved in amber," Schott writes, Early's views on racial inequality never changed, and seemed to fuel his views on the Lost Cause (235). Early's undiminished ferocity for the Lost Cause took on religious fervor, and he became the keeper of the true faith: all adherents had to convince him of their sincerity.

George Rable, Williams' last graduate student, examines more spiritual religiosity in his treatment of Stonewall Jackson's image as a Christian soldier. Rable begins with Jackson's pre-war religious life and his eventual acceptance of Presbyterianism—though even he admitted to struggle with predestination—and even formed a "colored Sunday school" that soon ran afoul of local planters. As a commander, Jackson believed in the absolute sovereignty of God, and believed that a battle's outcome depended upon religious observance to bring victory. His death proved shocking for Confederates, who "turned the general's life into an evangelical object lesson," and also attributed the general's demise to their own religious shortcomings: having worshipped a general like a deity, God struck him down in order to teach impious Confederates a lesson (191).

Such lessons were not lost on all Confederates in the years after the war, though many sought to lay blame for military, rather than spiritual failings. J.E.B. Stuart is oft criticized for leaving Lee blind at the critical moment of his invasion of Pennsylvania while James Longstreet, at the same battle, has been criticized for questioning Lee's overall plan and being too cautious in his attacks on July 2. Both men receive treatment in this volume. Joseph Dawson looks at Stuart as a cavalry commander during the Gettysburg Campaign, and highlights his exploits both before and after the decisive battle. Though Stuart would later claim that "I have a grand time in Pennsylvania and we [his cavalry] returned without defeat," it was apparent to all that he had left the Army of Northern Virginia blind in enemy territory (142). Longstreet also received blame for the loss at Gettysburg, and perhaps because he lived much longer than Stuart (and became a Republican), he was an outcast of the Lost Cause. William L. Richter's essay explores the life and legacy of Old Pete, from his service as Lee's most stalwart corps commander to his post-war career as an advocate for the New South. He also makes it clear that Longstreet, seeking a return of his political rights after President Johnson refused to pardon him, openly accepted the Republican cause. Where Richter's essay excels is its recognition of Longstreet as the South's first, and maybe only, modern military commander. His reliance upon sound defensive principles, trenches, and his advocacy for planning made

him excel when he did not have to press forward, though, as Richter shows, it has taken southerners a long while to rediscover Longstreet's military merit. Unlike Longstreet, who sought to turn away from the southern past and embrace the future, John B. Gordon wanted to heal the emotional scars left by the Civil War and dedicated much of his life to that proposition. Ralph Eckert's contribution highlights just how different Longstreet and Gordon were in the years after defeat. While white southerners turned on Longstreet, Gordon's reputation as a field commander remained largely unscathed because of his efforts to maintain the southern social order, including his participation with the KKK. As the commander in chief of the United Confederate Veterans, he inspired a devoted following for his desire to transcend sectional discord by way of nationalism: "The unseemly things which occurred in the great conflict between the States should be forgotten, or at least forgiven, and no longer permitted to disturb the complete harmony between North and South" (263). Eckert takes Gordon for his word, and defends the man and his memoir from the popular professional trend of detraction.

Overall these essays are a fitting tribute to T. Harry Williams. All of them deal with significant themes of Civil War military history and the Lost Cause, and, when read as a whole, are a suitable way for scholars to acclimate themselves with many of the current debates of Confederate historiography and immerse themselves in the personalities, alliances, and politics of Lee and his generals.

Adam Pratt earned his PhD from Louisiana State University in 2012. He is currently an adjunct instructor at the same institution.