

Reading the Man: A Portrait of Robert E. Lee Through His Private Letters

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Review

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Pryor, Elizabeth Brown *Reading the Man: A Portrait of Robert E. Lee Through His Private Letters*. Viking Press, \$29.95 hardcover ISBN 9780670038299

Another Look at Robert E. Lee

In her latest biography, Elizabeth Brown Pryor invites us to read the man, that is, to understand Robert E. Lee through his own words. In his private writings, argues Pryor, Lee revealed himself to be a far more complex and contradictory man than the one who comes most readily to the imagination (xii). Opening each chapter with the text of selected letters written by Lee or his family and friends, Pryor utilizes these missives as departure points for her narrative. Roughly chronological, this series of twenty-six essays follow Lee from his childhood love of animals through his last days as the president of Washington College. Her research is often inventive; lacking letters written by Lee when a cadet at West Point, she relies on the correspondence of his classmates to recreate what he might have experienced. Throughout the book, she offers many fascinating story-lines: his elder brother's scandalous seduction of his sister-in-law, the Marquis de Lafayette's 1825 tour of the United States, and the incredibly rich history of his wife's home Arlington—including its transformation into the nation's most sacred burial ground. But she also situates Lee and his family within the rich context of the mid-nineteenth century, including the emergence of the middle class, the Second Great Awakening, developing notions of companionate marriage, changing ideas about childhood, and the evolution of birth control.

While hundreds of biographies of Lee have been written since his death in 1870, Pryor's account seeks to amplify our understanding of what constitutes heroism, and how as an ordinary person Lee faced the vagaries of the human condition (xiii). Thus her primary objective is to understand his personality—his motives and his inspirations. Contrary to Lee's most famous biographer Douglas Southall Freeman and more recent scholars such as Richard B. McCaslin, Pryor

suggests that the Confederate general did not especially idolize George Washington. She likewise investigates Lee's opinions of his father Light Horse Henry Lee, French military strategist Antoine-Henri Jomini, and others, in the end concluding that it was probably West Point's system that had the most lasting effect on Lee (69). And yet perhaps most surprising, and seemingly contradictory, is her claim that Lee once stated that the greatest mistake of my life was taking a military education (67).

More important, Pryor makes it abundantly clear that this is no hagiography (as she labels the work of Freeman). Although she claims not to be debunking any myths, she does just this as she builds on the work of Alan T. Nolan, Michl Fellman, and others who challenge the Lee as deity mentality. The Lost Cause tenet that Lee abhorred slavery—and certainly did not fight for it—collapses in her account. She describes him as an unsympathetic and demanding master (145) who fiercely believed in racial hierarchy but often found his slaves to be a hindrance. She details an incident in which he vigorously pursued two slaves who ran away (believing that they had been freed by the will of Lee's father-in-law) and their subsequent beating. The real tragedy for Lee, she claims, is that he never recognized the humanity of the slaves with whom he lived, (154). Continuing in her effort to reveal the human-side of the Marble Man, she argues that the Lee so often deemed as a Christ-like figure came quite late to any profession of religion. She stops short of Alan Nolan's suggestion in *Lee Considered* that Lee weighed his options before joining the Confederacy in 1861, but she does detail the conflicted nature of his resignation from the United States army. And following a rich literature established by Nolan, Thomas Connelly, Gary W. Gallagher and others, she challenges the notion of Lee as a die-hard reconciliationist in the war's immediate aftermath.

Reviewers inevitably call for more attention to some facet of a work, and in this vein, I wish that she would take a firm position on many issues. Repeatedly, she hints at a particular explanation or offers the interpretation other writers but refuses to forcefully articulate her own position. For example, she claims that many historians believe that a lack of Confederate unity and will, or nationalism, led to the South's defeat. While she notes that the Confederate population never pulled together in the kind of total war that would save Stalingrad (392) the reader is left wondering if in fact she agrees that a lack of Confederate nationalism undermined the war effort. Nevertheless, this is an engaging and eloquently written book on the Lee behind the legend.

Caroline E. Janney is an assistant professor of history at Purdue University and the author of Burying the Dead but Not the Past: Ladies' Memorial Associations and the Lost Cause.