

Stonewall Jackson: A Biography

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Review

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Davis, Donald A. *Stonewall Jackson: A Biography*. Palgrave Macmillan, \$21.95 hardcover ISBN 9781403974778

Stonewall Jackson: Man and Myth

On Sunday afternoon, May 10, 1863, Confederate Lieutenant General Thomas Jonathan Stonewall Jackson died. The Confederacy lapsed into mourning, and a long history of what might have been arguments dawned. Jackson excelled during his short career in Virginia, and he may well have helped the Army of Northern Virginia to continue to dominate the Army of the Potomac. Yet, despite the claims of countless authors, we shall never know for certain.

An intriguing figure such as Jackson invites biographers. From his childhood as an orphan until his death on the battlefield, Jackson's austere life entailed hard work, religious study, and deep emotional wounds. These characteristics combined to create a devout, reticent man who surrendered all to the will of an almighty God. Despite, or perhaps because of, the deaths of his parents, his first wife, and his own children, Jackson steadfastly accepted the Calvinistic notion of divine will. He never questioned God, and he did not fear a future over which he had little or no control. This frame of mind turned him into a terror on the battlefield. Unfortunately for the officers and men who served under him, his blind devotion and fearlessness often translated into stern discipline delivered from the hands of a martinet. Yet he was more than a crazed zealot; he possessed a keen strategic and tactical mind, which won him the loyalty of his troops and the devotion of Robert E. Lee.

Dozens of biographies, monographs, and articles have been written that cover almost every facet of Jackson's military career. Is another study needed? Perhaps . . . but not this one. Donald A. Davis, in writing *Stonewall Jackson* for the Great Generals Series, offers nothing new or important. In fairness to the author, this is largely because of the nature of the series. Palgrave sets the

parameters for the authors. Thus far the books, written by amateur historians, lack sound writing and editing, research in primary source material, and bibliographies. Davis does write well, and his work is generally free of serious factual or analytical errors. This cannot, however, atone for the book's numerous shortcomings, the same shortcomings that plague all the books in the series. In short, Palgrave has created a series of books that are useless not only to scholars and serious students of the war but also to the casual reader. Those wanting to learn military history will find the accounts of battles cursory, and those wanting to know about the generals' personal lives face the same problem.

The best Jackson biography is James I. Robertson's *Stonewall Jackson: The Man, the Soldier, the Legend* (1997). Robertson, one of the nation's most distinguished Civil War historians, has produced a probing examination of Jackson's life with exhaustive research into all the available primary and secondary sources. The Jackson that emerges from the pages of his work is a three-dimensional human being, warts and all, rather than the caricature of the Christian soldier that Davis paints. Robertson's biography demonstrates what historians should be doing when writing biographies and what presses should be asking for from their writers. All Palgrave offers is a high-school level text aimed at mass-market sales for a readership that should demand more and refuse to pay the hefty price for sub-standard work.

John D. Fowler is an Associate Professor of History and the Director of the Center for the Study of the Civil War Era at Kennesaw State University. He is the author of Mountaineers in Gray: The Nineteenth Tennessee Volunteer Infantry Regiment, CSA (University of Tennessee Press, 2004) and The Confederate Experience Reader (Routledge Press, 2007). He is completing a study of Tennessee during the Civil War Era.