Reading the Man: A Portrait of Robert E. Lee through His Private Letters (review)

Ben Wynne

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expected from a boy his age" (p. 3), arrived at West Point with misgivings. Despite its alien atmosphere, where novels and poetry were forbidden, he comported himself with dignity and by dogged determination and perseverance managed to graduate seventeenth in a class of forty-two all the while avoiding athletic rigors in favor of the flute and chess. He got along reasonably well with his new acquaintances, including those who would play a major role as military enemies in his future—Robert E. Lee, Leonidas Polk, Albert Sidney Johnston, Joseph E. Johnston, and Jefferson Davis.

In early childhood, he lost his mother, and his benevolent father died in Heintzelman's third year at the academy. Restrictions were such that he could not attend his father's funeral, and it was more than a year before he could view his parent's grave. The rigor of his academic life allowed little time for mourning, and he was more determined than ever to perform creditably. Upon graduation, he hoped for an assignment with the topographical engineering corps, but his grades—as good as they were—did not permit the ambition. Instead, he found himself in the infantry, though engineering ultimately opened up for him.

Thus it was that he spent years of service in the chill of the Lake Huron country and the heat of Texas and Arizona. There was some relief from the weather in San Diego, California, where he also dabbled in real estate investments. His entrepreneurial schemes marked the rest of his life as he entered into a number of unrewarding ventures in mining for gold and especially silver. All the while, he served his country against Indians and later in the War with Mexico. In both episodes he performed well.

His service in the Civil War began propitiously enough with the command of the Third Corps in the Army of the Potomac during the Peninsula Campaign. Here he came to admire Joe Hooker, Philip Kearny, and Dan Sickles. His initial admiration of George McClellan declined, and, ultimately, he would be critical of his commander's judgment in his appearance before the Committee to Investigate the Conduct of the War. Heintzelman's career took a downward turn upon assuming the defense of Washington.

Banished to the West, he supervised prisoner-of-war camps and reported on Copperheads. During Reconstruction he was only somewhat effectual against unreconstructed rebels in Texas, partly because of his politics. "They can't make me a radical" (p. 308), he once defiantly asserted. Retirement soon followed.

This well-written and well-researched book has the merit of being both a life and a times biography. Professor Thompson should be congratulated for his performance.

Texas State University–San Marcos JAMES POHL

Reading the Man: A Portrait of Robert E. Lee through His Private Letters. By Elizabeth Brown Pryor. (New York: Viking, 2007. Pp. 684. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. ISBN 978-0-67003-829-9. $29.95, cloth.)

Robert E. Lee's legend has for generations cast a long shadow over the South. In defeat, the former Confederate general *became* the South, or at least the personification of an image that the South desperately wanted to project onto itself.

He was the best-known southerner of his generation, yet in many ways those who worshipped him did not know him at all. Through the years many books were written about Lee, but historians have always grappled with the problem of separating myth from reality to create a well-rounded portrait of the man. In her new book *Reading the Man,* Elizabeth Brown Pryor has broken new ground in the study of Robert E. Lee. Using a wealth of recently uncovered primary sources, she exposes important elements in the character of the "marble man" and offers new insights into his personality.

The book is organized chronologically, beginning with an analytical treatment of Lee's childhood that centers on the life and disposition of his controversial father, Henry Lee, the Revolutionary hero who met with disgrace in later life. Using the future Confederate general's own words, Pryor then successfully humanizes Lee through a treatment of his early character and home life including his relationship with his wife and children, painting a rarely seen picture of a tender man who dearly loved his family and enjoyed reminiscing. Considering Lee's reputation for formality, his personal thoughts, presented here in unfiltered correspondence, are as much startling as they are telling. As the author points out with regard to the general's children, "the intense emotion he felt for the seven 'little Lees' is so clear and so touching that it is in a sense superfluous to try to embellish his words in any way" (p. 94). Furthermore, Lee as a young man is portrayed as a bit of a dandy and incurable flirt who was more comfortable with women than with men.

Naturally Lee's military service takes up a great deal of the book, and again the correspondence colors the story with emotions and revelations that make this a unique biographical treatment. As a young soldier Lee relished his service in the Engineers Corps, calling it the best assignment that a soldier could ever want. During the Mexican War he gained the favor of commanding general Winfield Scott and drew inspiration from a visit to the Alamo in San Antonio. Yet as his responsibilities and particularly his prominence grew, a clear ambivalence toward army life began to surface. He began writing about leaving the army as early as the 1840s and continually fretted about the military keeping him away from his family. "Unless they give me some position which will enable me to bestow some care upon my family," he wrote in 1856, "I feel that I should be obliged to resign" (p. 189).

The book goes on to describe and interpret the major events in Lee's life, reflecting a complicated man who was trying to chart a course through complicated times. For instance, Lee had little sympathy for slaves, yet abhorred slavery. He was a private man, yet he lived a public life, and while he had literally pledged his loyalty to the United States as an army officer, his dedication to his home state of Virginia never wavered as civil war loomed. Finally, with regard to Lee's religious life, the author points out that the man who himself would be deified by generations of Southerners was actually more of a reluctant convert to organized religion.

Pryor has produced an outstanding work based on new, priceless correspondence that makes a major contribution to the study of Robert E. Lee, Civil War history, and American history in general. In doing so, she has humanized Lee and proven beyond a doubt that the "marble man" may not have been made of marble after all.

Gainesville State College BEN WYNNE