

### Quiet Competence: A New Biography Rediscovered The Confederate General Dubbed 'Old Straight'

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## Review

### QUIET COMPETENCE

**A new biography rediscovers the Confederate general dubbed 'Old Straight'**

**Winschel, Terrence J.**

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**Elliott, Sam Davis** *Soldier of Tennessee: General Alexander P. Stewart and the Civil War in the West*. Louisiana State University Press, ISBN 807123404

Few names of Confederate officers who served in the Army of Tennessee come more quickly to mind than that of Alexander P. Stewart. "Old Straight," as he was affectionately called by his men, was an aggressive, hard-hitting, no-nonsense type of soldier who won renown on many bloody fields of battle.

From Shiloh to Perryville, Murfreesboro to Chickamauga, and Chattanooga to Atlanta, he fought with courage and consummate skill. A man devoted to duty, he suffered along with his men in the disastrous advance into Tennessee in 1864 and was with them to the bitter end in North Carolina. A professional soldier by training, he graduated 12th out of 56 cadets in the West Point Class of 1842, which included future generals such as James Longstreet and William S. Rosecrans.

A Tennessean by birth, he cast his lot with the Confederacy and during the Civil War rose steadily through the ranks from colonel in charge of a regiment to lieutenant general in command of a corps. Through it all, he was steadfast, courageous, and indomitable in spirit and earned the respect and admiration of friend and foe alike.

Yet, this extraordinary soldier remains largely unknown to students of the Civil War -- shrouded in mystery except to those intimately familiar with the history of the Army of Tennessee. Unlike many of his contemporaries who were embroiled in the constant controversies which surrounded the army's high command, Stewart remained aloof and free from political maneuvering.

Perhaps in part for this reason he has failed to garner the attention of historians. Despite his sterling military performance, service as an educator in the years which followed the war, and work as the Confederate representative on the Chickamauga-Chattanooga National Military Park Commission, he faded into obscurity.

Sam Elliott, a lawyer from Chattanooga, provides us with the first in-depth analysis of this key figure since publication of *General A. P. Stewart: His Life and Letters* by Marshall Wingfield in 1954. Elliott has combined a passion for history with the dogged research skills of his profession to reveal a most gallant warrior and teacher. His is a masterfully written, smooth flowing narrative that traces the life of this prominent figure and argues convincingly that such obscurity is undeserved. Unlike Wingfield's earlier biography, Elliott attempts to analyze Stewart's role in the war and his performance in the many battles in which he fought, and in so doing has produced a rich and fast-paced account of the war in the West.

Regrettably, Stewart left few papers, and there is no large collection of his writings available from which to draw an intimate understanding of the man and the influences of family, friends, and environment that shaped his early life. Thus the public figure with whom we are most familiar appears to be a man of great complexity and contradiction. Despite the challenge posed by a paucity of papers, Elliott valiantly attempts to unravel this personality.

The author paints a portrait of a humble, yet proud man who was ever mindful of the well-being of those entrusted to his care, be they soldiers or students. His deep faith, which was practiced in every aspect of life, even on the field of battle, earned for him universal acclaim. Stewart was respected by his peers for "quiet competence," and few in an army in which politics was high science begrudged his advancement.

In the preface to his work, Sam Elliott refers to the bronze statue of Stewart that stands in front of the Hamilton County Courthouse in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Although the statue is in sight of where the general and his men fought with grim determination in the fall of 1863 to stem the onrushing tide of Federal soldiers who stormed Missionary Ridge, it "is noticed by few -- an ornament ignored by most people who walk by it." Elliott laments that, "Only children and tourists from out-of-state seem to really look" at the statue. From now on, thanks to Elliott and the publication of *Soldier of Tennessee*, Alexander

P. Stewart will be more than a statue.

*Terrence J. Winschel writes from Vicksburg and is author of Triumph & Defeat: The Vicksburg Campaign, which is reviewed in this issue.*