

Davis Do Right: A Laudatory Biography Depicts Jeff Davis From His Own Perspective'

Steven E. Woodworth

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

Recommended Citation

Woodworth, Steven E. (2000) "Davis Do Right: A Laudatory Biography Depicts Jeff Davis From His Own Perspective'," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.2.1.10

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol2/iss1/10>

Review

DAVIS DO RIGHT

A laudatory biography depicts Jeff Davis from his own perspective'

Woodworth, Steven E.

Winter 2000

Allen, Felicity *Jefferson Davis: Unconquerable Heart*. University of Missouri Press, ISBN 826212190

Why has Jefferson Davis been the subject of so many poor biographies? Over the century since his death, the Confederate president has somehow inspired what is probably the worst overall body of literature of any great figure in American history. With the happy exception of William E. Dodd's brief 1908 biography and William C. Davis's (no relation) excellent and comprehensive 1991 work, attempts to tell the life story of Jefferson Davis have been lame at best. Perhaps the reason for this problem lies in Davis's own nature.

Throughout his adult life Davis insisted that only fools or knaves could possibly disagree with him, because he was always right. Having played a large and controversial role in history, and one that was profoundly wrong, he never repented or in any way allowed the possibility of any rightness among those who fought against him to end slavery and save the American experiment in self-government. His rigid claim to justification makes it hard for scholars to handle him with balance. When studying Jefferson Davis, the temptation is strong either to reject him totally or to accept him on his own terms, and this, added to every biographer's perennial temptation to idolize his subject, has been too much for most Davis writers.

Felicity Allen meets these temptations with unconditional and immediate surrender. In her preface she deplores the too-negative tone of previous works on Davis, a problem not noticed by most students of the Civil War. Of Hudson Strode's adulatory three-volume work published during the 1950s -- which prompted one scholar to observe, "Every page reeks of magnolia blossoms" -- she explains on page xiii that it "has been overlooked because it lacks scholarly apparatus." This she sets out to remedy, and indeed, what follows is well over

500 pages of essence of magnolia blossoms" -- with footnotes.

Her first chapter introduces Jefferson Davis by telling the story of his transportation as a prisoner from Georgia to Fort Monroe, Virginia, after his capture at the end of the Civil War. It immediately becomes apparent that the author has done an enormous amount of research. The account is detailed and picturesque. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that anyone, then or since, ever said anything complimentary about Davis that is not included in these pages. Davis is presented as a noble, suffering hero and fares well in comparisons with a whole range of historical figures from the Knights of the Round Table to Jesus Christ.

The author then turns to Davis's ancestry and early life, in an account that is detailed, accurate, and familiar to readers of previous Davis biographies. By the time of Davis's West Point sojourn, Allen's own perspective becomes noticeable. Davis simply did no wrong, or at least nothing seriously wrong -- not even in the famous egg-nog riot that got him court-martialed. And he certainly was not intoxicated during that affray. The book continues through his army days, his resignation, his marriage, and his taking up of a plantation. Davis was a model officer and was certainly in the right the second time he was court-martialed. Allen recounts Davis's services in the Mexican War (heroic) and as secretary of war (wise and dedicated), but it is her accounts of the political issues of Davis's life during the 1840s and 1850s that are most notable and most disturbing. Allen rails against the abolitionists as evil enemies of the last bastion of Christian civilization, the slaveholding South. Abolitionists, she argues, did not understand slavery and would not have cared about the good of the slaves even if they had been capable of recognizing the slaves' best interests. The well-known evils of the slave system, such as separation of families, she dismisses as myth. The slaves themselves she represents as happy and contented, and, in a nice touch, opines that the passes that slaves had to carry when traveling off the plantation (lest they be picked up by the dreaded slave-patrol) gave the slaves a pleasant feeling of belonging. Congressional legislation that in any way curtailed the free spread of slavery she represents as being a hostile attack upon the people of the South -- as if white Southerners, unlike other mortals, were incapable of living except by the sweat of other men's brows.

By the time the reader reaches the sections about secession and the outbreak of the Civil War, Allen's interpretations will not be surprising. When Southerners walked out of the 1860 Democratic convention, *they* were the *national* Democrats, while those who remained were the "rump convention." The

undeniably legal and constitutional election of Abraham Lincoln was an aggression against the South. The outbreak of war as a result of Davis's order to attack Fort Sumter she represents as entirely Lincoln's fault, stating, in blatant falsehood, that Lincoln had intended to insert troops and ammunition into the fort -- rather than food only -- even if Confederates had not opened fire.

If all this is, by now, predictable, the account of the War will be more so. The South was noble, virtuous, and brave; the North vile, barbarous, and dominant in numbers of soldiers. Northern numbers eventually smothered Southern valor, though Gettysburg, let it be well marked, was not a Southern defeat. The horrors of Andersonville and other Southern prisons were not the fault of their perpetrators but rather of the North, which refused to exchange prisoners. She neglects to mention that this was because the South insisted on treating as slaves those United States soldiers who had black skins. Through all this she depicts Davis as sage and heroic; his friends and supporters, good; his critics, beneath contempt.

With Davis's capture near Washington, Georgia, the story comes full circle to where the book began. Allen then proceeds to devote more than one-eighth of the book's length to an astonishingly detailed account of Davis's two-year imprisonment in Fort Monroe, including detailed parsing of his letters from the fort and of the marginal comments he jotted in his reading material. She characterizes his treatment there as torture, because the food and accommodations were not to his liking and because, being very sensitive, he was kept awake by the tread of nearby sentries. Even his brief stint wearing manacles somehow failed to create that pleasant sense of belonging allegedly enjoyed by the erstwhile slaves. Through this section and the subsequent account of Davis's later years, Allen stresses the Southern theme of that time depicting Davis as a Christ-figure who suffered vicariously, in this case, not for the sins of his people but as a propitiation to their persecutors.

This is hagiography -- literally -- despite the fact that the author has no doubt combed vast numbers of pages in search of the praise she repeats and that she does so in a pleasant writing style. There may be some value in depicting the world of Jefferson Davis from his own perspective -- wherein he was always right -- but this work flatly fails to present the fair and reasonably objective account of the subject's life and times that one hopes to find in good biography. Once again, Jefferson Davis has baffled the biographers.

Steven E. Woodworth is author of Jefferson Davis and His Generals and Davis and Lee at War. He teaches history at Texas Christian University.