

On Jackson's Flank: A First Biography Of Confederate Officer Robert Rodes

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Review

ON JACKSON'S FLANK

A first biography of Confederate officer Robert Rodes

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Swisher, James K. *Warrior in Gray: General Robert Rodes of Lee's Army*. Burd Street Press, 2000-04-01. ISBN 157249168X

Robert Emmett Rodes strode across Douglas Southall Freeman's Lee's Lieutenants "as if he stepped out from the pages of *Beowulf*." A tall, blond-haired man, Rodes emerges in the hands of Freeman as one of the Army of Northern Virginia's finest warriors and as a romantic figure. The unforgettable image of Rodes is etched in the darkening woods around Chancellorsville as Stonewall Jackson turns to his subordinate and says, "You can go forward then, General Rodes."

Since Rodes's death at the Battle of Third Winchester, the historic portrait of the soldier has been primarily confined to the pages of Freeman's seminal three-volume work. Rodes has eluded historians because the documentary record is scant. Before her death, his wife, Virginia H.W. Rodes, destroyed all of his papers and personal letters in her possession. That act has muted a full study of her husband as a man and as a soldier.

Rodes's performances on some of the bloodiest battlefields in the East during the Civil War merits historical inquiry. Born in Lynchburg, Virginia, on March 30, 1829, educated at the Virginia Military Institute, and an engineer before the War, he rose from the colonelcy of the 5th Alabama to divisional command in less than two years. By the spring of 1863, when his division spearheaded Jackson's famous flank attack at Chancellorsville, Rodes was among the army's best combat officers.

Like others in the Confederate army, Rodes faltered at Gettysburg. During the Overland campaign and in the Shenandoah Valley campaign during the spring and summer of 1864, however, he reestablished himself as a gifted

divisional commander. Early on the afternoon of September 19, 1864, on the outskirts of Winchester, Virginia, as he prepared his brigades for a counterattack, Rodes died instantly when a shell fragment struck his head. His remains were hauled to Lynchburg and interred in the Presbyterian cemetery.

A chronicle of Rodes's Confederate service is a chronicle of the Army of Northern Virginia, except for the War's final months. He led his Alabamians at First Manassas and charged with them at Seven Pines. His brigade defended a gap on South Mountain and he stood with it in the "Bloody Lane" at Sharpsburg. As a divisional commander, Rodes was at Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, the Wilderness, Spotsylvania Court House, Cold Harbor, Monocacy, Cool Spring, and Third Winchester. His is a record matched by few others in the army at his level of command.

James K. Swisher offers the first full-length biography of this fine Confederate warrior. Undaunted by the reluctance of other historians to undertake a study of Rodes, Swisher examined an impressive number of sources for his book. Without Rodes's personal wartime correspondence, particularly to his wife, the soldier overwhelms the man. Swisher's study, except for a fine examination of his prewar life, is almost entirely a narrative of marches, camps, and battles. Whatever private views Rodes expressed to his wife about fellow officers, the army's operations, and Confederate fortunes evidently disappeared when his wife burned his correspondence.

Consequently, Swisher has written a yeoman study of the Confederate Rodes. The author treats the subject fairly, but **Warrior in Gray** is a highly sympathetic treatment of Rodes. Without the general's personal papers, Swisher seldom gets beyond the Confederate uniform.

Warrior in Gray is a book, however, plagued with factual errors and spelling and grammatical mistakes. Individuals are either misidentified or their names misspelled. Winfield Scott Hancock, for example, is both "John Hancock" and "Scott W. Hancock." Numbers of individuals, particularly Federals, are introduced in the text without their first names. Events are misdated, and the traditional interpretations of generals and campaigns are followed. Finally, the number of run-on paragraphs testifies to the need for an editor. It would seem that the publisher did not give the manuscript a critical reading.

Nevertheless, Swisher's **Warrior in Gray** is a welcome book. Civil War buffs and historians have a biography of a Confederate officer who has deserved a study for a long time. Although Freeman's Nordic giant hovers in the background, Swisher's work is a fairer and more balanced portrait.

A high school history teacher, Jeffry D. Wert is author of five books on the Civil War: From Winchester to Cedar Creek (1987), Mosby's Rangers (1991), General James Longstreet (1994), Custer (1997), and A Brotherhood of Valor (1999). He currently is working on Gettysburg - Day Three.