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Review

A ROBERT E. LEE FOR OUR TIME

Biography's analysis of General Lee's 'moral measurement' falls somewhat short

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Fellman, Michael *The Making of Robert E. Lee*. Random House Trade, 2000-11-01. ISBN 679456503

A towering figure in American history - whether depicted in marble or clay - Robert E. Lee continues to draw the attention of historians. The last quarter-century has seen a sustained assault on Lee's legacy and the mythology that was constructed around it to vindicate the Confederate cause. Recent decades have seen a cascade of books seeking to demythologize Lee. With the exception of such balanced texts as Emory Thomas's 1995 *Robert E. Lee: A Biography*, these works have generally engaged in such historical overkill that they have not only exploded the myth but also obscured the man.

Michl Fellman's previous work, *Citizen Sherman*, was a controversial psychobiography of the great Union general. In **The Making of Robert E. Lee**, Fellman now applies the same methods to Lee. Indeed, this work is not so much a full biography of Lee as it is a rolling psychoanalysis of him. Fellman dissects Lee's writings, trying to discern (or guess) the attitudes, feelings, and beliefs that might have lain behind them. The process is at times more imaginative and intuitive than it is analytical.

In his analysis of Lee's thinking, Fellman is at his best in dealing with the general's Civil War career. Commendably, he looks beyond the literal claims when interpreting Lee's military statements, such as his attempts to cast the failed northern incursions in the best light. By comparing Lee's correspondence from different times, he reveals a general whose strategic aspirations were not at all the modest goals he represented after events had dashed his more ambitious hopes.

With even more impressive insight, Fellman traces the shifts in Lee's state of mind during the War. Throughout the early and, from Lee's point of view, highly unsatisfactory part of the War, Lee maintained a spirit of patient resignation, but with his assumption of the command of the Army of Northern Virginia and the beginning of his subsequent string of stunning battlefield successes, Lee gave way to a more aggressive mindset. The passiveness, humility, and resignation that had been the hallmarks of his personality up to that time became less pronounced in the exultation of a fierce warrior who reveled in victory. It was, as Fellman astutely points out, perhaps the only aspect of Lee's life in which the austere Virginian allowed almost free rein to his inner passions.

Lee's great offensive victories fell within the space of a single year. They began with his success in the Seven Days campaign of late June and early July 1862 and ended with the close of the first day's fighting at Gettysburg, July 1, 1863. With the end of this amazing year, Lee reverted in many ways to his former resigned and passive mode. The gradual decline in Southern fortunes coincided with Lee's own growing health problems, and Lee met both in a spirit of patient submission to divine will.

While Fellman's analysis of Lee's wartime career is interesting and enlightening, other parts of his psychoportrait of Lee are more troubling and less convincing. More than Lee's strategic genius and battlefield leadership, it has been the Virginia general's sterling character, impeccable morals, and selfless devotion to duty that have, over the 130 years since his death, made him the admiration of both North and South. Whether Americans considered his choice of the Confederate cause admirably noble or tragically misguided, they could agree in prizing the many virtues he epitomized. Even today, after a quarter-century of attack, scarcely any of Lee's critics have questioned his self-control or his devotion to duty. Even Fellman allows for the presence of these traits in Lee, at least in part; he seems to question only their virtue.

As he states on the final page, Fellman's purpose in assessing Lee's character is to demonstrate that he represented the parochial values of a single time and place, "not universal ones." **The Making of Robert E. Lee's** attack on Lee as an enduring moral exemplar takes two angles. The first is to question, to a moderate degree, Lee's possession of the virtues that have hitherto been attributed to him. This he does through an extremely free interpretation of Lee's writings. For example, other scholars have noted letters Lee wrote to young female friends. Some passages of these letters could reasonably be construed as mildly

flirtatious, but Fellman goes much further, torturing from these letters - and others even more innocent - what he sees as indications of at least some illicit contact. On page 243 he quotes an 1869 letter of Lee's to Laura Mason Chilton: "Your invitation to your wedding . . . has carried me back to the pleasant days when you were a little girl in Texas, when you and [your sister] Emmie gave me so much pleasure, the purest if not the greatest I enjoyed while there." Fellman follows this up with the comment, "Remembering the lovely little girls had triggered memories of less pure pleasures with another, grown woman as well, Lee hinted." He obviously hinted nothing of the sort.

Denying Lee his well-established virtues is something Fellman does relatively rarely in this book. To a large degree even he must admit that Lee exercised great self-control and frequently set aside his own selfish desires in order to fulfill his duty as he understood it. Hence the second prong of Fellman's analysis, in which he pervasively contends that these qualities were far from virtuous. Sometimes the author's judgment on this score is dazzlingly apparent. On page 303, Fellman states: "Unquestioning obedience to duty, deep emotional repression in the name of self-control and self-denial, endless discipline, and the attempt to enact moral purity, taken as a package, now seem rather less than humble and psychologically realistic and even can appear to amount to an invitation to hypocrisy." The thinking that is here explicitly stated is implicitly assumed throughout the work. Fellman implies that setting aside one's selfish desires in order to do the right thing, denying one's baser impulses in favor of noble duty, "now" can be properly understood as "emotional repression," not a virtue but a pathology.

One would almost think from Fellman's analysis of Lee that the only valid and healthy reason for a man to refrain from serial adultery is that he feels no temptation to that sin. Such thinking is no doubt a sign of the times, the scholarly expression of a decade in which the people of the United States (Fellman, be it noted, is a Canadian) supported a president of spectacularly debauched character who repeatedly committed disgraceful acts in the Oval Office with a woman the age of his daughter, then minutes later walked into church with his wife on one arm and an oversized Bible in the other. Modern culture seems as ready to succumb to its impulses as it is to detect "invitations to hypocrisy" in earlier, more virtuous eras.

Fellman's book is interesting, sometimes enlightening, sometimes shocking, and sure to be controversial, but his attempt to redefine the moral measurement

of Robert E. Lee tells more about our modern age than it does about a man who, with all of the virtues he cultivated so diligently and the faults he knew only too well, is beyond the reach of the late 20th century's judgments.

Steven E. Woodworth is the author of numerous books on the Civil War, including Jefferson Davis and His Generals (1990) and Davis and Lee at War (1995). His forthcoming work, The Religious World of Civil War Soldiers, is scheduled to appear in fall 2001.