

Jefferson Davis: The Essential Writings

Steven E. Woodworth

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Review

Woodworth, Steven E.

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Cooper, Jr. William J. *Jefferson Davis: The Essential Writings*. Modern Library, \$24.95 ISBN 679642528

The President's Pen

Personal and political documents explored

This volume appears deceptively small but packs an amazing amount of valuable information on the life and career of the Confederate president. It contains the full text of well over 200 Davis documents—personal letters to family, letters to political associates and army generals, as well as speeches. A few of the latter are third-person reports of Davis speeches as given by newspaper reporters. The subjects of the various documents include personal relationships, business matters, politics, and military operations. The collection includes such relatively well-known documents as Davis's 1861 farewell to the Senate and his proclamation To the People of the Confederate States of America upon the fall of Richmond in April 1865. It also includes a great many documents that are less well-known. Most of these items have previously appeared in Dunbar Rowland's 1923 ten-volume set, *Jefferson Davis, Constitutionalist*, or in the on-going *Papers of Jefferson Davis*, edited by Lynda L. Crist, et al., of which eleven volumes have appeared to date. Thirteen documents, however, have never before appeared in a modern scholarly edition.

The picture of Jefferson Davis that emerges from this mass of source material is one of a sentimental youth who grew into a forceful and highly competent man. Generally kindly and fair, Davis was nevertheless committed to the proposition that the black race was inferior and that its best possible situation was that of slavery. The rights of slaveholders were of great importance to Davis. He highly valued the fugitive slave law and demanded the extension of slavery into the territories. Any who may still be inclined to doubt the centrality of slavery as the cause of the Civil War, should read these documents. They leave no doubt.

After the Civil War, Davis appears in his letters as a rather more likable person. His habitual insistence that he was right on every subject and that only knaves or fools could oppose him is not completely absent but greatly muted. Also, Davis's spirituality, which earlier seemed almost perfunctory, is deeper in these later writings.

Editor William J. Cooper, author of one of the best biographies of the Confederate president, provides an excellent introduction and useful explanatory notes. Although a reviewer would ordinarily forebear mentioning typographical errors, they are unusually significant in a work of this sort. Thus it is regrettable that on page 236 the text of a letter from Jefferson to Varina Davis has the Confederate president stating, I feel like mustering claws were in meùrather than mustering clans. Such errors are few, however, and do not seriously mar the value of the book.

And this is, indeed, a very valuable book. No student of the South, the Confederacy, or the Civil War will want to be without it. Even those who could afford the investment of money and of shelf space to buy the modern eleven-volume *Papers of Jefferson Davis* and who could even find a copy of Rowland's 1923 set, would still find this volume worth its price for the new documents it contains. For the rest of us the present volume is invaluable as a handy source for the most important primary documents relating to the life and career of Jefferson Davis.

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).