

Alexandria Goes to War: Beyond Robert E. Lee

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Review

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Kundahl, George G. *Alexandria Goes to War: Beyond Robert E. Lee.* University of Tennessee Press, \$45.00 hardcover ISBN 1572333200

Civic sacrifice

Fifteen bios from the longest-occupied city

George Kundahl's new book on Alexandria, Virginia, presents something of a paradox. It is well written, based on significant archival research, and offers a broad view of the Civil War, yet it fails to deliver a compelling historical argument. For a certain audience this book will be quite valuable--for Alexandrians or Virginians who want to know the stories of their ancestors, Kundahl performs a valuable service. In the book he resuscitates 15 people, most of whom were unknown outside the environs of Alexandria, and some even within the city. By describing the experiences of these historical actors from the prewar days through the war and, in some cases, into the 20th century, Kundahl offers a valuable preservation of civic accomplishment. The book assembles information not easily accessible and organizes it clearly, but for historians seeking an explanation for the war's origins or meaning or conclusion, it offers little that is new.

Kundahl begins with an effective overview of prewar Alexandria, stressing its modernism, economic success, and integration into the nation. The picture he draws here of a dynamic society meshes perfectly with what we now know about late antebellum Virginia. The next 15 chapters of the book consist of mini-biographies of different individuals that matured in Alexandria or resided in the city at the war's outbreak. The stories are highly individualized--each family is traced back several generations and the narratives stress the internal issues particular to each family as determining influences rather than the civic institutions of Alexandria, though Episcopal High School clearly played a role in generating a self-conscious and articulate generation of men. Organizing the book by person requires that Kundahl retell the story of the war anew in each

chapter. To his credit, these rarely repeat or strain the reader's attention. Kundahl's considerable skills as a narrator guide the reader through each story with a sense of novelty. His narratives of the campaigns and battles in which soldiers were involved are concise and clearly written. The cost of this approach, however, is considerable. The reader develops little sense of a central chronological narrative or single interpretive approach.

The individual biographies do contain resonances between them--one sees the ambivalence of many Alexandrians to support secession and their firm support of the Confederacy once war began, the emotional demands of being away from loved ones, and the struggles of young men, in particular, to both achieve notoriety and survive--but the past does not speak for itself. The obligation of the historian is to immerse him or herself in the primary material and then explain the period or place or problem under study. Kundahl makes no real effort at interpretation. His account is a chronicle of the lives of Alexandrians but not a history. The author may well argue that he did not intend to write an academic argument-driven book but the result highlights the gulf between academic and popular histories, particularly those of the Civil War. Without a thesis or any overt attempt to explain the meaning of the stories he tells, it is not clear what readers are supposed to make of these particular episodes.

If the book has a purpose, it is to show that all these men--and by implication most white Alexandrians at the time--served the Southern cause honorably, even if they were not all as distinguished as Robert E. Lee. The Confederacy's defeat is acknowledged frankly and frequently but the tactic of admitting loss serves only to highlight the patriotism of those who sacrificed. The message is repeated at the close of several chapters, as on page 297, when Kundahl praises the individuals who took the responsibilities of citizenship so seriously that they were willing to lay down their lives for what they believed. His judgment comes in the next sentence: It is unlikely that Americans will again see their duty in the same way these patriots received their orders and marched off to war. This conclusion, which is repeated in different form in several parts of the book, implies a subtle rebuke of the quality or expression of patriotism in evidence today. One cannot help but read this as a reflection of the author's assessment of the state of the nation in post-9/11 America.

Last, it is important to note that Kundahl only chronicles the experiences of Alexandrians who supported the Confederacy. In a footnote, he asserts that local

volunteers for the Union army were few and far between, though his text notes that Alexandria County residents opposed secession well beyond the time when their urban neighbors had pledged themselves to the Confederacy. Bringing the rural experience into the story would have enriched it significantly. Kundahl's decision to focus only on white pro-Confederates in the city means this does not qualify as an authentic local study. Though it is certainly difficult to find the voices of those outside the dominant political or racial or gender groups, other authors have done this successfully for other Virginia places. Gregg Kimball's multi-faceted account of Richmond, Daniel Sutherland's complex treatment of the contested territory of Culpeper, and Edward Phillips's study of the Lower Shenandoah Valley all demonstrate the variety and richness of life in wartime Virginia. Because Kundahl sidesteps the internal conflict that dominated the rest of northern Virginia and ignores black Alexandrians almost entirely, his book fails to satisfy as the history of a place. The missed opportunity here is significant because the evidence that Kundahl arrays is quite rich and could have formed the basis for a remarkable local study--especially on the topic of secession where he conveys a detailed sense of the crisis from a variety of viewpoints. His chapter on Anne Frobel (the only woman in the group) reveals the difficulty of life in occupied Alexandria but Kundahl does not integrate this material into the experiences of his other participants. By refusing to integrate the accounts of Alexandrians into a larger framework and by not broadening his focus to consider people who made different decisions regarding national loyalty during the Civil War, Kundahl undercuts what could have been a very valuable book. The result leaves us still wanting a good local study of the longest-occupied and most strategically important border city in the Confederacy.

Aaron Sheehan-Dean is an assistant professor of history at the University of North Florida, where he teaches classes in the Civil War, southern history, and slavery. He has published articles on the Civil War in Virginia and is currently working on a manuscript entitled The Family War: Motivation and Commitment in the American Civil War.