

Inventing Stonewall Jackson: A Civil War Hero in History and Memory

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Review

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Hettle, Wallace *Inventing Stonewall Jackson: A Civil War Hero in History and Memory*. Louisiana State University Press, \$34.95 ISBN 978-0-8071-3781-9

Re-examining a Civil War Legend

The Civil War is often noted for its paradoxes, so it is fitting that one of its most famous heroes, Stonewall Jackson, was (and is) a man about whom surprisingly little is known. In this brief but engaging book, Wallace Hettle, professor at the University of Northern Iowa and author of *The Peculiar Democracy: Southern Democrats in Peace and Civil War*, offers an intriguing recounting of how—and more importantly, why—the legend of Stonewall Jackson has fascinated generations of Americans from the Civil War down to the present.

Hettle's focus on the topic of Stonewall Jackson is unique—he rejects the traditional biographical approach and instead chooses to investigate Jackson's biographers, a varied group that includes Jackson's widow, his former chief of staff, and a 20th century poet. This is, in part, a practical measure, as Jackson's habit of destroying correspondence combined with his death midway through the conflict limits primary source material. But Hettle's methodology is motivated by more than necessity. He argues that Jackson became a legendary figure in part because of his battlefield success, but even more so because the mysterious Jackson cast shadows that each biographer, across generations, could interpret to fit their own needs. Seeking to identify why Jackson's popularity endured long after death, Hettle shows how a number of writers shaped public memory of the fallen hero and molded Jackson into a primary cultural touchstone, particularly for post-war white southerners. Hettle is persuasive in showing how, depending on the biographer, Jackson became a Christian martyr defined by selflessness, a military genius noted for peculiarities, a loving patriarch who doted on his family, a tragic victim whose death enabled many a Lost Cause fantasy about how close the Confederacy came to victory, and a poignant symbol of a fading

agrarian world. Not coincidentally, the roles and values assigned to Jackson by his biographers generally dovetailed with and thus reinforced the Jim Crow era of white supremacy in the South. But Jackson's influence was not monolithic—the most compelling chapter in this work focuses on the popular author Mary Johnston. Her 1911 anti-war novel *The Long Roll* utilized Jackson's famous campaigns as a setting from which to critique conservative Lost Cause tradition and subtly but firmly questioned Jackson's status as an icon of southern righteousness. The portrayal of Jackson that emerges as Hettle identifies each manipulation of the general's image reveals a Jackson who was largely used to reinforce the orthodoxies of a South grappling with defeat, but also a complex figure whose legacy was fluid enough to remain relevant even as the Lost Cause began to fade.

Even the most inventive books have their flaws, however. While the work is well-researched, the endnotes are presented in a manner that will frustrate scholars, because full titles of works are not given and page numbers for references are sporadic at best. And perhaps because three of the chapters were first published as articles, the book at times does read—despite the author's protest—as more of a collection of essays than as an integrated discussion. More significantly, the treatment of Jackson's contemporary relevance merits further exploration. Hettle occasionally but never systematically responds to more recent scholarship on Jackson. This relative omission is magnified by the inclusion of a brief final chapter on the 2003 movie *Gods and Generals* that does not suffice to explain the evolution of Jackson in memory since the early 20th century. This shortcoming is not unusual in works on Civil War memory, but it is unfortunate that a book that is otherwise sensitive to how the human need to remember evolves over time would end in a somewhat awkward and unsatisfying manner. Finally, Hettle is critical—or at least suspicious—towards traditional biography, and he also shies away from the recent emphasis on commemoration in the scholarship on Civil War memory. This is in part justifiable given his innovative approach to Jackson, but the refusal to integrate his insights with traditional scholarship represents an opportunity missed to create a more nuanced portrayal of Jackson.

None of these concerns should dissuade potential readers from what is overall a compelling and much-needed case study of what turns out to be not one Stonewall Jackson, but many. Hettle's clever work should not only stimulate fresh investigation of Jackson's legacies, but remind us that in our eternal fascination with the Civil War we continually see what we most desire to see.

Benjamin Cloyd teaches at Hinds Community College in Raymond, Mississippi and is the author of Haunted by Atrocity: Civil War Prisons in American Memory (LSU Press, 2010).