

From Manassas to Appomattox: Memoirs of the Civil War in America

George C. Rable
University of Alabama, grable@ua.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Rable, George C. (2020) "From Manassas to Appomattox: Memoirs of the Civil War in America," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.22.2.15

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol22/iss2/15>

Review

George C. Rable

Spring 2020

Longstreet, James. *From Manassas to Appomattox: Memoirs of the Civil War in America.* Indiana University Press, 2020. Hardback: \$75.00; Paperback \$25.00 . ISBN: 978-0-253-04706-9.

At least since 1867 when James Longstreet wrote a letter urging southerners to accept the reality of military reconstruction, he became one of the most controversial figures of the Civil War era. Political revulsion quickly led to extensive criticism of Longstreet's military career focusing on his performance at Gettysburg. In letters and articles, Longstreet responded in kind, sometimes inconsistently, often defensively, and the battle has been joined ever since. Defenders of Robert E. Lee and the Lost Cause have often portrayed Longstreet, if not exactly as a villain, at least as a deeply flawed general who had let the Army of Northern Virginia down during those fateful July days in Pennsylvania. In our own time, Robert K. Krick, especially in his wonderfully titled essay, "If Longstreet . . . Says So, It Is Most Likely Not True": James Longstreet and the Second Day at Gettysburg," has followed suit. Taking up the cudgels for Longstreet have been historians William Garrett Piston and Jeffrey D. Wert, but it was novelist Michael Shaara who turned the general into a tragic hero in his classic novel *The Killer Angels*. To this day, any mention of Longstreet's name can start an argument among Civil War buffs and some historians.

Longstreet lived a long time after the Civil War and in 1896 published his memoirs that dealt almost exclusively with his Civil War career. Various editions have appeared since, the best one in 1958 as part of the Indiana University Press's fine Civil War Centennial Series. In the introduction to that volume, the young and increasingly accomplished historian James I. Robertson, Jr. authored a nicely balanced assessment of Longstreet. "Dependability rather than brilliance was Longstreet's forte," (p. xiv) Robertson maintained. The general had a close relationship with Lee, exerted a calming influence on his commander, but generally favored defensive warfare. In a Solomonic judgment that largely split the difference between the

general's critics and defenders, Robertson assessed Longstreet's performance at Gettysburg as mixed.

As for the memoir itself, Robertson described Longstreet's work as "unbalanced, critical, and sometimes erroneous" yet also "of great interest and historical value" (p. xxiii). That is a fair assessment, and Robertson's useful notes helped readers identify errors of fact and judgment. Longstreet was no great stylist, so this lengthy tome makes for often dry reading, though there are important passages throughout sprinkled among the lengthy accounts of various campaigns. Longstreet was writing a history of the Army of Northern Virginia more than a personal reminiscence, so the chapters are filled with organizational and operational details as well as substantial excerpts from the *Official Records*. Longstreet takes an occasional swipe at Stonewall Jackson, but any criticisms of Lee are mild and muted. Longstreet devotes a good deal of attention to the East Tennessee campaign during which he proved himself unsuited for independent command but attributes any problems or shortcomings to Braxton Bragg or various subordinates. Throughout the memoirs Longstreet adds some sharp opinions on both Confederate and Union generals along with criticism of strategy and tactics with the general's preference for the defensive becoming abundantly clear. Longstreet presents some information and personal details not found elsewhere, and so *From Manassas to Appomattox* remains an important source for students for the war.

This new edition from Indiana University Press reprints the 1958 volume along with a forward by historian Christian Keller. Keller deems Longstreet's magnum opus to be an "indispensable primary source" that takes the reader inside the Army of Northern Virginia's high command. He rightly credits Longstreet with a great eye for detail and praises him for an ability "to see the big picture . . . and grasp the significance of contingency events" (p. xxxiii). Most readers may want to dip into this massive volume rather than read it from beginning to end, but all will welcome the reappearance of this classic work.

George C. Rable, University of Alabama, Emeritus is currently working on a study of the relationship between George McClellan, Abraham Lincoln, and the Army of the Potomac and a project indexing published primary sources dealing with the Civil War:
<https://adhc.lib.ua.edu/rableindexes/>