H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Peter Carmichael, ed. *Audacity Personified: The Generalship of Robert E. Lee.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003. xxi + 174 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2929-6.

Michael Fellman. *The Making of Robert E. Lee.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003. xx + 360 pp. $18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8018-7411-6.

Reviewed by Alexander Mendoza (Department of History, The University of Texas at Tyler)
Published on H-CivWar (April, 2005)

Disparate Views of General Robert E. Lee

The presence of Douglas Southall Freeman's *R. E. Lee: A Biography* (1934) still looms over Civil War historiography and the study of the Confederacy's foremost general. Freeman, the prominent newspaper editor and historian, wrote about a Christ-like Lee who fought for an honorable cause and exemplified attributes of the tragic hero. Freeman personified Lee as the ultimate cavalier, a superior Virginia gentleman whose religious righteousness guided him through life. Freeman's work won the Pulitzer Prize for biography and left historians probing for new perspectives and insight on the Confederate chieftain. Amidst the revisionist and hagiographical studies of Lee in the last few decades, two recent studies have taken divergent paths in studying the Virginia general.

Michael Fellman's *The Making of Robert E. Lee* takes the latter approach in analyzing the man who led the Confederacy's Army of Northern Virginia. The book is not a thorough biography of the general, but rather, an analysis of Lee's state of mind and his purported struggle with personal demons. Fellman highlights the important events in the general's life and provides a psychoanalytical study of Lee which reaches far beyond an objective examination of the general and delves into speculation and gossip.

A consistent theme in Fellman's work is Lee's views toward his family. The author maintains that Lee used his family's social standing to further his personal and professional identity to his ideal father-figure–George Washington. In the process of fulfilling his image of the ideal Virginia gentleman, Lee proved obsessive about the righteous path of his children and resentful that his wife, Mary Custis, was not more understanding in her role as the wife of a soldier. Amidst Lee's stoicism and self-restraint, Fellman argues, the Virginia general engaged in flirtatious relationships with young women who "triggered memories at times long past" and temporarily lifted his spirits (p. 247). Fellman portrays Lee as an old, embittered man whose frustrations with his personal life and his obsessive desire to emulate Washington influenced his flawed sense of grand strategy and ultimately resulted in Confederate defeat. Ultimately, Lee emerges as a southern nationalist who defended secession and resented the political elevation of African Americans. Fellman's study, thus, falls in line with recent revisionist evaluations of Lee which retread old arguments and counter the Confederate general's place in southern history to stir debate.

In contrast, Peter Carmichael's *Audacity Personified: The Generalship of Robert E. Lee* recognizes the difficult challenge of trying to say something new about the Confederacy's foremost general. Not deterred by this daunting task, Carmichael's collection of essays focuses on specific aspects of Lee's military leadership. While the author recognizes that no "single question or conceptional framework unites these essays," the works share the common thread of challenging the long-standing beliefs of Freeman's *R. E. Lee* (p. xvi). Carmichael's own essay on Lee's search for a decisive battle of annihilation, for instance, takes the general to task for having unrealistic goals in regards to maintaining offensive operations by 1864, "a time when Confederate expectations became more conservative and realistic" (p. 20). Carmichael effectively argues that Lee lost touch with the southern populace by the latter stages of the war and as a result, Lee failed to adhere to the best strategy which would grant the Confederacy its independence, a defensive-oriented approach to conserve southern manpower.

Gordon C. Rhea's contribution is also critical of Lee in 1864. Rhea, the renowned expert on the Overland Cam-

paign, refutes Freeman's interpretation of a clairvoyant Lee who always foresaw Grant's intentions in his drive to Richmond. Rhea argues that the commander of the Army of Northern Virginia was continually befuddled by the Union general's goals. Yet through good luck and an ability to react quickly to the latest retreat, Lee was able to thwart Grant's drive to the Confederate capital. William J. Miller's essay, "The Siege of Richmond Was Raised" re-examines Lee's tactics in the Seven Days' Battles. Miller challenges the assertion that Lee attacked the Federal army at the gates of the Confederate capital with the intent to annihilate it. In contrast, the author argues, careful reading of the primary evidence reveals that Lee hoped to move the enemy army rather than destroy it. Once presented with the opportunity, however, the Virginian did try to inflict heavy damage on the Union army. But, a grand design to obliterate the Federals was not evident with the launch of the Confederate flanking movement. Robert E. L. Krick, a distinguished historian of the Army of Northern Virginia and an expert on Confederate staff officers, challenges the popular notion that Lee did not value the body of officers which made up his personal staff. Krick recognizes that Lee did not contribute to the Confederacy's system of staff work, but he did not dismiss it either. Max R. Williams's "The General and the Governor" examines Lee's relationship with North Carolina governor Zebulon B. Vance. Williams points out that contrary to prior assertions, Lee did not shirk politics and political matters. Rather, the Confederate commander established a cordial relationship with Vance which not only garnered the governor's respect, but also gained his cooperation in wartime matters such as trying to halt contraband trade and in curbing desertion from the ranks of the Army of Northern Virginia. Mark Bradley, a historian of the Battle of Bentonville, studies Lee's role as general in chief of the Confederacy. Bradley credits Lee for establishing a positive command partnership with General Joseph E. Johnston in the final months of the war. While Lee was slow to recognize the strategic situation near Petersburg, he was successful in getting the most of Johnston. Bradley argues that through praise and flattery, Lee "motivated Johnston to fight," something that he had been unable or unwilling to do prior to 1865 (p. 166).

While Fellman's psychological analysis of Robert E. Lee might prove useful to students and critics of the Confederate general, his study suffers from the author's conjecture on the general's motives and ideas. While Fellman surely tried to understand Lee, it appears he failed to gain the insight into the general's life he so desperately sought. As a result, *The Making of Robert E. Lee* struggles to maintain a sense of objectivity and critical analysis. In contrast, Carmichael's *Audacity Personified* succeeds in challenging old notions of Lee's generalship. The study is well written and impeccably researched. Yet the book's strength may be that it forces the reader to think critically of each author's particular conclusion on aspects of Lee's generalship that for decades have long been accepted as fact. Historians and general readers alike will surely turn to Carmichael's collection of essays for a critically objective re-evaluation of the Confederacy's foremost general.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Alexander Mendoza. Review of Carmichael, Peter, ed., *Audacity Personified: The Generalship of Robert E. Lee* and Fellman, Michael, *The Making of Robert E. Lee.* H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. April, 2005.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10432

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.