

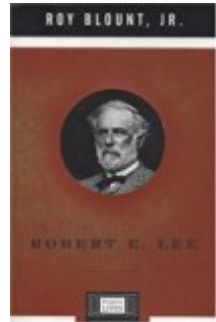
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Roy Blount, Jr. *Robert E. Lee*. New York: Penguin Group, 2003. 210 pp. \$19.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-670-03220-4.

Gamaliel Bradford. *Lee, the American*. Mineola: Dover Publications, 2004. xx + 231 pp. \$12.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-486-43368-4.

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## Robert E. Lee, the Human Being

Who was Robert E. Lee? Of all the questions arising from a study of the Civil War, this is, perhaps, one of the most intriguing to many historians. One of the reasons students of the war continue to ponder this question is the wide and varying views of Lee presented in Civil War historiography. From the late nineteenth century until the middle of the twentieth, Lee was primarily presented in varying shades of perfection. The early writings of former Confederates depicted him as a Christ-like figure symbolic of the Lost Cause, while Douglas Southall Freeman's monumental 1934 Pulitzer Prize-winning work, *R. E. Lee: A Biography*, painted a picture of Lee as the saintly, perfect model of a military commander that would dominate historiography for over thirty years.

In recent decades, however, there has been renewed interest in examining Lee from a more contemporary viewpoint, which has produced many revisionist studies. This new analysis has run the gamut from Emory Thomas's even-handed biography, *Robert E. Lee: A Biography* (1995), to Thomas Connelly's works, most notably *The Marble Man: Robert E. Lee and His Image in American Society* (1977), and Alan Nolan's more radical work, *Lee Considered: General Robert E. Lee and Civil War History* (1991). While the specific characterizations of Lee expressed in these works have differed in tone and hue, all of these have shared a common thread that Lee was far more fallible and "human" than depicted in earlier studies. In doing so, many of the analysts take a much more detailed look at Lee and closely examine hereto-

fore unexplored aspects of his life such as the impact of his childhood and adolescent experiences, as well as the resulting motivations that drove him and influenced his performance as a leader and commander.

One of the reasons these analyses of Lee examine him and his life using such radically differing approaches is that they are all products of the times in which they were written. As such, they each reflect their era's views not just of the Civil War's social and political basis and impact, but also the commonly held views of the time with regard to psychology and the very nature of the human condition. This is exactly the case in the books reviewed here, Gamaliel Bradford's *Lee: the American* and Roy Blount's *Robert E. Lee*. As such, a comparative analysis of the two texts provides an interesting opportunity to see how historiography on Robert E. Lee has changed over time.

The publication of *Lee: the American* in 1912 brought Gamaliel Bradford, a previously itinerant and unsuccessful writer, fame and commercial success. His study of Lee is what we might now term a sort of "intimate" biography, in that it attempts to explore the human characteristics of the subject. Bradford referred to it as a "psychography," which he described as a "portrayal of a soul" (p. 189). The formula was so successful that he would go on to write an entire series of "psychographies." Bradford later revised *Lee: the American* in 1927, primarily to accommodate notes and correct transcription errors, and it is that version which is reviewed here.

In his study, Bradford takes a broad, meandering approach to Lee's life that begins and ends chronologically

with views of Lee before and after the war, while looking at specific subject areas in between, such as Lee's decision to go with Virginia into the service of the Confederacy, his relationship with Jefferson Davis, his qualities as a general, and his domestic and spiritual life. While Bradford's original preface supplies no hints as to his purpose, the preface to the revised edition makes clear that this book was intended from its inception to extol and laud the virtues of Lee as a man of greatness, as a man of whom all Americans, both North and South, should be proud, reflecting the climate of reconciliation early in the twentieth century. Therefore, as a Northerner who praised Lee, Bradford placed himself in the same group with other notable Northerners, such as Charles Francis Adams, Julia Ward Howe, and Theodore Roosevelt, who also held the late Southern general to be a model of American manhood. His dedication is even more revealing of his mindset when, by dedicating the book to the young men of the North and South and stating that they had the ability to make or unmake the future of the nation, he refers to the America of Washington, Lincoln, and Lee, actually placing Lee on the same level with the man who was the first president and the man who was, arguably, the nation's greatest chief executive. This context in terms of time and attitudes is important as one looks at Bradford's conclusions because it both allows the reader to not be too harsh in judging his efforts, while also ensuring that one exercises a little extra caution in accepting either the author's analysis or his statements of fact.

As to the latter point, the veracity of Bradford's analysis does come into question when one examines his sources. While Bradford did add notes to this revised edition of his work, those notes are based upon a list of sources that is starkly limited and suggests selectivity based upon the author's perspective. For example, many of the works he cites and provides as factual basis for aspects of Lee's nature, abilities, and character are the products of authors such as Lee's nephew, Fitzhugh, his son, Rooney, and biographer J. William Jones. To describe these men as Lee "enthusiasts" would be stating the case mildly, especially Jones, who was selected by the Lee family to write the general's biography and who became known as the "evangelist of the Lost Cause." As a result, Bradford's use of these authors as objective sources places many of his conclusions in doubt and properly so.

Like Bradford, Roy Blount is also a professional writer, not a historian. He has primarily served as a journalist, writing mostly humorous works for magazines such as *Sports Illustrated* and *The Atlantic*. Unlike

Bradford's approach, Blount's discussion of Lee comes chronologically, discussing various aspects of Lee's character and personality as they developed in the course of his life. While Blount does not unequivocally state his purpose, the opening pages of his book make it clear that he seeks to find a way to shed some light on the enigma, the mystery of who Lee really was, what forces made him, and what motivations drove him.

Unfortunately for the historian and student, Blount provides no notes, only a bibliography that is slightly more extensive than Bradford's. Naturally, Blount's references include more recent sources, many of which do not paint the adoring picture of Lee as did so many of those in Bradford's era. Blount quotes Emory Thomas at several points and his overall approach to analyzing Lee is similar to that found in Thomas's 1995 biography of Lee. Therefore, Blount's analysis of Lee can clearly be termed more "modern" than Bradford's in that it relies on current views of human psychology and the way our environment, especially that of childhood, our family relationships, and the society we grow up in, influences who we eventually become. As a result, not only are his views and his analysis of Lee different than Bradford's, his entire approach to Lee's evolution as a human being is clearly poles apart from Bradford's.

In examining these two authors' divergent views on Lee, we can begin with Lee's childhood, where the differences are quite remarkable. Bradford gives Lee's childhood little attention, covering this crucial period of the general's life in barely two pages. No mention is made of the fact that Lee's father, "Light Horse" Harry Lee, went bankrupt and fled to the West Indies to escape his creditors, leaving his wife and children in desperate straights. Rather, Bradford merely says that Lee did not see his father much and that, given the death of the elder Lee when young Robert was only eleven, there was little paternal influence. He adds that Lee "cherished his father's memory with deep reverence" (p. 2). However, he never reveals the source of this rather astounding statement. Lee's relationship with his mother, meanwhile, is described as "much more prolonged and intimate" (p. 3). The fact that Lee acted as the caregiver to his invalid mother and managed the household is merely depicted as having taught him self-sacrifice at the expense of limiting some of the joys of a more carefree childhood. In sum total, Lee's development to greatness as an adult appears, in Bradford's mind, to have been something of a miracle of nature.

Blount, meanwhile, spends much of his first chapter

and a major part of an appendix discussing not only the details of Lee's childhood and his relationship with his parents, but also the impact of the heartbreak and shame resulting from his father's failures, which stained the Lee reputation as one of the first families of Virginia. In addition, Blount depicts Lee's eventual character as being strongly influenced by the intense strain created by a youth spent not only as his mother's nurse, but also as her closest confidant and what virtually amounts to a role as a surrogate parent. Using a contemporary understanding of human psychology, Blount's analysis shows us a man who grew up in an atmosphere marked by insecurity and shame, and who, under his mother's influence, became excessively self-controlled and prone to accept discomfort to a point where any sense of joy or pleasure was perceived as improper. Blount also sees Lee's childhood as contributing to his desire to avoid any type of personal confrontation, a trait that would later adversely impact his ability to manage his wartime staff.

Another area of tremendous divergence between these authors is the subject of Lee's domestic life. Bradford depicts Lee's marriage to Mary Custis as a seeming model of domestic perfection, and he refers to her as a "charming wife and mother" to whom Lee was devoted (p. 148). Blount, however, describes the Lee marriage as a match of total opposites in which Mary Custis Lee was "one of the few women in Robert's life about whom he was not passionate" (p. 29). Blount paints her as a dowdy, nagging, frail, spoiled, habitual complainer who made a poor choice as the wife of a professional soldier. While it would seem Lee genuinely missed his children when apart from his family, Blount indicates that he still seemed happiest when away from his wife. His depiction, therefore, leaves one the clear sense that Lee's marriage to Mary Custis was one merely designed to garner position and property, and to help return the Lee name to its rightful place in Virginia society.

One of the more interesting areas of discussion in both books involves Lee's views on slavery and, here, the two authors do not differ quite so markedly. Bradford states categorically that Lee was not an advocate of slavery. Rather, Bradford relates, he took a position common with some Virginians and other Southerners that, while the institution was essentially evil, blacks were better off as slaves. In Bradford's analysis, Lee considered the relationship of master and slave as being enlightened and humane, and the best that could be hoped for at that point in history. He saw immediate emancipation as being impractical and Bradford indicates his own tacit agreement, stating that, while the abolitionists of the 1860s were cer-

tain emancipation would make things better for the black slaves, the passage of time since the war had "taught us better" (p. 25). While Bradford quotes Lee as stating that "wherever you find the negro, everything is going down around him" and admonishing his son, "You will never prosper with the blacks," (p. 25), Bradford takes Lee's lukewarm disapproval of the theory of slavery and turns it on its head by saying he disliked and detested it. Bradford makes this apparent contradiction even more ludicrous by saying that Lee's efforts on behalf of a government committed to the extension and maintenance of slavery was one of the great tragedies of history, making Lee somehow even more noble and virtuous.

As indicated earlier, Blount, in many ways, does not stray far from the facts of Bradford's text, but differs in his analysis of them. He portrays Lee as seeing slavery as a necessary evil, an institution of God's willing, and one whose future course should only be determined by Southern slave owners. Unlike Bradford, who quotes only a line of Lee's letter to his wife where the general says slavery is a moral and political evil, Blount quotes the remainder of the letter in which Lee goes on to say that the slaves' current state was "necessary for their instruction as a race" (p. 58). He also points out that, while Lee did free many of the Custis family slaves, Lee also had no problem renting them out to other men and reaping a profit from this supposed evil. Blount includes a complete appendix to discuss, at length, Lee's views on slavery where he states that Lee's entire disapproval of slavery seems derived from viewing slavery as a management issue, not a moral one. In other words, while Lee might disapprove of slavery in the abstract, in the theoretical, Blount sees Lee as having approved of slavery as both necessary and benevolent in practice, decrying the impractical management issues involved in any idea of emancipation.

Finally, the authors' differences narrow when discussing the question of Lee's qualities as a general. Bradford spends a great deal of time discussing Lee in battle and his performance as a commander, primarily taking what might be referred to as a "traditional" view of Lee's generalship. Interestingly, Bradford offers a caveat in his discussion of the subject, stating that, since he is not a military expert, he cannot take a personal stand on Lee's attributes as a military commander. Rather, he says that he prefers to defer to the judgment of others more qualified, whom he goes on to quote extensively. However, for a man who was not taking a stand, Bradford's position is quite clear. While he quotes numerous sources and provides both negative and positive opinions on Lee's mili-

tary performance, Bradford always dismisses those who are negative, referring to some as being “extreme” in their views. Further, Bradford carefully notes that a source is “Northern” in origin and, if it is a Northern source with a negative opinion, he invariably makes certain that he follows it with a Northern opinion that is positive. On the subject of Lee’s performance at Gettysburg, which has been the subject of considerable analysis regarding Lee as a general, Bradford provides no special focus and never seems to even attempt to explain why Lee failed in this critical battle. In the end, the reader is simply left with a feeling that, in Bradford’s opinion, only those who extol Lee as almost infallibly brilliant are correct.

Blount, however, is more thorough on this subject and tries to examine Lee as a commander from several different angles. Unlike Bradford, he spends more time looking at Gettysburg in an attempt to understand why Lee went wrong, even approaching it psychologically as possibly an attempt to equal his father’s Revolutionary War bravado. In the end, Blount sees Lee as a general who failed on the tactical offensive at Gettysburg perhaps because, while he was “inspiring,” he was “not necessarily cogent” (p. 129). However, Blount also gives Lee due credit, praising his defensive shifts and counters to Grant during the 1864 Overland Campaign as brilliant. In total, Blount’s view is more evenhanded, seeing Lee as a commander who was audacious and, sometimes, brilliantly so, but who also was human, and, therefore, fully capable of monumental mistakes when his talents were

overwhelmed by the particular situation he faced.

These two authors provide two differing views of Lee that result, to a great extent, from two different views of human nature and what makes a man admirable. In concluding his text, Bradford tells the reader that he loves Lee and was influenced greatly by him. But, for Bradford, his love is that felt for a Lee who is possessed of a saintly perfection and an almost divine nature. His view seems to be that it is Lee’s perfection we must admire and be inspired by, no matter how unattainable for mere mortal beings such as us. This, too, may be a view that is simply a product of Bradford’s time. Blount, on the other hand, gives us a Lee who was possessed by his own personal demons, as are all of us. Further, and, again, as with all of us, these demons defined him and probably determined to a great extent who he became as a man. But, Blount’s Lee survived his demons, he overcame them to some degree, as we all hope to do, and led a great army, holding it together through terrible adversity as perhaps no other man could. In the final analysis, Blount’s Lee is human, flawed, and, perhaps, far more admirable than Bradford’s for being so.

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