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Paul D. Casdorph. *Confederate General R. S. Ewell: Robert E. Lee's Hesitant Commander.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004. xii + 474 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2305-9.

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The Many Faces of Richard S. Ewell

On July 1, 1863, Lieutenant General Richard Stoddert Ewell, commander of the Second Corps of the Army of Northern Virginia, made a fateful decision–a decision that has been second-guessed by Civil War veterans, military strategists, generations of historians, and just about anyone else who has ever read about the Battle of Gettysburg. As most historians know, two of Ewell's divisions arrived at Gettysburg on the afternoon of July 1 and launched an attack that, along with elements of A.P. Hill's corps, succeeded in routing two Union corps from the sleepy Pennsylvania hamlet and capturing some three thousand prisoners. Flushed with victory but tired and disorganized, Ewell's men halted their advance late that afternoon near a range of small hills south of the town. Federal troops used this respite to begin fortifying Cemetery Hill in preparation for an attack. Here, Robert E. Lee ordered Ewell to capture the high ground if possible. Ewell apparently decided an attack was not possible, and thus the Federals held the high ground as reinforcements arrived. Precisely what Lee said, what he meant, and how Ewell responded have been hotly debated subjects in the Gettysburg campaign. Moreover, despite his extensive service with the Confederate army, this one decision has defined Ewell and established his reputation as an overly cautious, perhaps indecisive commander who squandered an excellent chance to win the Battle of Gettysburg and hence the war. So goes the conventional view of Ewell.

Content with labeling Ewell as one of the scapegoats for the Confederate defeat at Gettysburg, scholars ignored the rest of his life and career. Indeed, only one biography of the general existed until the 1990s, Percy G. Hamlin's *Old Bald Head* (1940). In 1991, Samuel J. Martin ended a half-century drought with his *The Road to Glory: Confederate General Richard S. Ewell.* Both Hamlin and Martin offered fine overviews of the general's life, but neither delved deeply enough. Indeed, the image that most students of the Civil War have of Ewell came from the pen of Douglas Southall Freeman in his massive multi-volume study of the Army of Northern Virginia, *Lee's Lieutenants* (1942-44). However, in 1998, Donald C. Pfanz published a well-received biography, *Richard S. Ewell: A Soldier's Life*, that challenged what historians had been writing about Ewell since the end of the Civil War and sought nothing less than a complete rehabilitation of the man's image. According to Pfanz, Ewell was a competent general who often exhibited brilliance on the battlefield. Pfanz's Ewell was not solely responsible for the Confederate fiasco at Gettysburg and, indeed, played a pivotal role in the Rebel successes in the Shenandoah Valley, the Seven Days, and later at the Wilderness. This favorable portrayal, however, would not go unchallenged for long.[1]

Just when historians were being encouraged to rethink their estimation of Ewell, Paul Casdorph's new biography attempts to reestablish the traditional view of the general. Casdorph, professor emeritus at West Virginia State College, has two goals in writing this monograph. First, he wants to demonstrate that Ewell was a "flawed" commander because he could not or would not take decisive action at critical moments on the battlefield. Second, he wants to uncover why Lee sustained such a "seemingly impaired soldier" (p. ix). Casdorph suggests that Ewell suffered from a manic-depressive disorder that appeared early in his military career and worsened progressively and that this ailment was at the root of his inability to make swift decisions. At First Manassas, for example, he refused to move against Union forces because he had not been given specific orders to do so. The Confederate victory could have been more convincing if Ewell had shown any initiative. Instead, Casdorph maintains, the general remained timid and unable to think clearly in the heat of battle. While the author does admit that Ewell performed well in the Shenandoah Valley campaign of 1862, he attributes this more to the leadership of Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson than to Ewell's prowess as a commander. According to Casdorph, because Ewell could not make effective decisions on his own, he related

well to Jackson's domineering style of leadership.

Ewell's mental problems were exacerbated further when he received a ghastly wound in the Second Manassas campaign that necessitated the amputation of his left leg.While he recuperated, he married his cousin Lizinka McKay Brown, an overbearing woman who demanded much of the general's time and controlled his decisions. Moreover, Ewell was caught up in the religious fervor sweeping the South in early 1863. Casdorph implies that Ewell may have returned to the battlefield even more cautious because of the amputation, his marriage, and his conversion to religion. Yet the author has to admit that this is mere conjecture. However these events may have affected Ewell, for Casdorph, his true downfall came with the death of Jackson at Chancellorsville and his subsequent rise to corps command. As to why Lee chose Ewell, the author suggests that on the surface at least Ewell appeared to possess the necessary skills to be a successful officer. He had thirty-five years of active serve with the U.S. and Confederate Armies; he had been recommended for higher command by Jackson; he had performed well thus far in the war; and he was a Virginian from a well-established family. Ultimately, however, Lee promoted Ewell because of his lineage, his loyalty to Virginia, and sheer urgency. For Casdorph, this was a mistake.

Ewell's blunders in the Gettysburg campaign draw the harshest criticism from Casdorph. He maintains that if Ewell had obeyed orders and seized Cemetery Hill, then the Confederates would have won the battle and indeed the war. Yet again, this is only speculation. He fails to prove that being overly cautious led to the defeat or that storming and capturing the high ground outside Gettysburg would have led to Southern independence. Although Lee would have controlled the road network radiating out of the small Pennsylvania hamlet, the battle would not have been decisive. The campaign would have continued. Meade's army, although battered, was still intact, still able to maneuver, and still capable of defeating the Confederates. Also, Vicksburg would still fall three days later, European recognition would still be doubtful even with a Confederate victory at Gettysburg, and Lincoln would in all likelihood never contemplate a peace that severed the United States, regardless of how many battles the Union lost. In short, Ewell and the Army of Northern Virginia were going to have to do more than mangle two Union corps and capture the high ground around Gettysburg to win the war for the Confederacy. This lost opportunity is a chimera. Too many factors, incidents, and personalities, both Union and Confederate, contributed to the Federal victory at Gettysburg to lay the ultimate outcome of the battle, much less the war, in Ewell's lap. To hold Ewell's actions ultimately responsible for the Confederacy's inability to win its independence is too fantastic to be credible.

The book jacket to Casdorph's work refers to it as the definitive study of Ewell; however, this it certainly is not. That distinction goes to Pfanz and his magisterial biography. Pfanz covers Ewell's life in remarkable detail and provides a balanced view of the general's career. Pfanz's Ewell is neither hero nor villain. He is simply an above average commander who performs well the majority of the time. In contrast, Casdorph's Ewell is a mental cripple who is unfit for command. His good decisions and combat performances at battles such as Cross Keys or Second Winchester are brushed aside as aberrations, while his cautious decisions and stumbles at Gettysburg and Spotsylvania are used as proof of his incompetence. Casdorph heralds the traditional view of Ewell's generalship, and he supports his position with documentation; however, he really offers historians nothing new. As Pfanz points out, historians who criticize Ewell are too often willing to take the postwar accounts of Jubal Early, Isaac Trimble, and John Gordon at face value without realizing that these men enhanced their reputations at the expense of Ewell. This appears to be the case with Casdorph's work.[2]

It is unfortunate for Casdorph that his biography was published after Pfanz's because the two will always be compared. Yet, given their different conclusions, this cannot be avoided nor should it. Those who support Ewell will champion Pfanz; those who condemn Ewell will support Casdorph. However, the two monographs are not equal. In sum, Casdorph has written a good book while Pfanz has written a great one.

Notes

[1]. Percy G. Hamlin, *Old Bald Head (General R. S. Ewell): The Portrait of a Soldier* (Strasburg: Shenandoah Publishing House, Inc., 1940); Samuel J. Martin, *The Road to Glory: Confederate General Richard S. Ewell* (Indianapolis: Guild Press of Indiana, 1991); Douglas Southall Freeman, *Lee's Lieutenants* , 3 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942-44); Donald C. Pfanz, *Richard S. Ewell: A Soldier's Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

[2]. Pfanz, *Richard S. Ewell*, p. xiv.

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