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Gary Robert Matthews. *Basil Wilson Duke, CSA: The Right Man in the Right Place.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005. xviii + 358 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2375-2.

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Published on H-CivWar (August, 2006)

Emerging From Morgan's Shadow

Basil Wilson Duke has often been overshadowed in Civil War military annals by his flamboyant commander and brother-in-law John Hunt Morgan, despite the fact that during the war itself he was frequently regarded as an important factor in the latter's success. As an old joke ran, Morgan's brains would pop out if Duke was struck over the head. Part of this lack of prominence derived from Duke himself, who did so much in his own postwar writings to shape the myth of Morgan. Duke avoided criticizing Morgan as much as possible, always put Morgan in the center of the picture, and considerably downplayed his own role in Morgan's operations. As a result, there has long been a need for a full-length study of Duke's life and military career. Gary Robert Matthews's book is the first effort to fill that gap.

Matthews traces Duke's development as a soldier from his days as a scout in Missouri to his role as Morgan's second-in-command and later successor. In the process, he covers the different raids and campaigns in which the Kentucky cavalryman participated, including Morgan's disastrous 1863 foray into Ohio, and Duke's participation in Jefferson Davis's escort party during the final days of the war. Much of Matthews's assessment of Duke's wartime role is similar to that in such works as James A. Ramage's 1986 biography of Morgan. Here, Duke is seen as the common-sense influence on and disciplinary counterweight to the flamboyant and erratic Morgan.[1] Matthews goes much further than others, however, in stating the extent to which Duke was responsible for Morgan's basic tactical style. He convincingly argues that Duke's ideas on cavalry tactics originated from his early experience as a scout, and that if not the direct source of Morgan's approach to warfare, he was at least a major influence. Bolstering Matthews's claim is his discovery that Duke wrote a work entitled *Tactics for Mounted Riflemen*, published in Lexington during the 1862 advance in Kentucky. Unfortunately, the work evidently does not survive (it is never directly cited), so that Matthews's views, though plausible, must to a certain extent remain speculative.

While Matthews's focus is on Duke's military career, the book covers his entire life. It is skimpiest on the antebellum years, due to a lack of materials and to the fact that Duke was still a young man at the time that the war broke out. Thus, while the origins of Duke's family and the basic details of his childhood, education, and his career as a lawyer are traced, we do not get very much of a sense of his formative influences. Slavery and the issues related to it are dealt with rather perfunctorily.

By contrast, nearly 100 of the 305 pages of text are devoted to Duke's postwar careers as an attorney, a politician, and an author. In some ways, this is the most interesting part of the book, as it covers aspects of Duke's life perhaps not as well known to those who do not specialize in Kentucky history. Duke became an attorney and lobbyist for the Louisville and Nashville Rail Road (ironically, the same line which had formerly been a frequent target of his and Morgan's raids); served in the state legislature; edited the Lost Cause magazine *Southern Bivouac*; was a founding member of what became the Filson Historical Society; and became friends with Theodore Roosevelt. While Matthews deals with the political and legal matters in some depth, some of the other topics are passed through relatively quickly, leaving a number of things tantalizingly unexplored.

While an interesting narrative account of Duke's life, *Basil Wilson Duke, CSA* feels at times if it were written in an earlier decade. Although published by a university press, Matthews is a freelance writer and thus does not share many of the interests or questions that an academic might bring to the subject. He has dug deeply into the primary manuscript and early published sources on Duke. He has also done a lot of research into secondary sources on Kentucky history and on Civil War military history; indeed, much of the latter, in particular, is recent. In general, however, with the exception of

a few brief citations to recent monographs, much of his research on the broader currents of nineteenth-century Southern history and antebellum and postwar politics is more scattershot, and is frequently limited to relatively old sources. Occasional comments along the lines of "as Klan violence grew, Forrest and many more responsible members quit the organization in protest" (p. 223) give the text an antiquated feel, as do assessments such as Matthews's characterization of the supposedly "harsh Reconstruction policies" (p. 231) of the Grant administration. In a discussion of the 1872 presidential election, his reduction of Horace Greeley to "a noted eccentric" is curious. (p. 231)

Despite such caveats, Matthews's book provides a good narrative overview of Duke's life and career, and should serve as a starting point for future studies of this neglected figure.

Note

[1]. James Ramage, *Rebel Raider: The Life of John Hunt Morgan* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986).

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Citation: Michael Coffey. Review of Matthews, Gary Robert, *Basil Wilson Duke, CSA: The Right Man in the Right Place*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. August, 2006.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12143

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