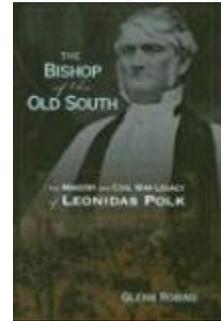


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Glenn Robins. *The Bishop of the Old South: The Ministry and Civil War Legacy of Leonidas Polk*. Macon: Mercer University Press, 2006. xii + 243 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-88146-038-4.

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Published on H-CivWar (October, 2007)



Bibles and Bullets: Re-Examining Leonidas Polk

For years, Civil War historians have endeavored to write military biographies that both examine the details of battles and campaigns and try to make sense of one person's life in the midst of chaos and war. Recently—reflecting an attempt to understand not only how the subject shaped society, but consequently, how society shaped the individual—biographies have expanded their focus to memory, legacy, and more cultural analysis. Glenn Robins has delved into this new form of biographical writing with his latest work, which examines the life and legacy of Leonidas Polk. Despite the fact that many of Polk's early papers vanished in the flames of a cabin fire, Robins successfully explores Polk's life and offers rich details concerning religion, planter ideology, and the roots of southern nationalism.

Polk, who Robins calls “one of the most important Episcopal leaders of the antebellum South,” worked to make Episcopalians a vibrant denomination in the face of competition from the entrenched Baptists and Methodists (p. x). Born on April 10, 1806 to parents of an aristocratic family in North Carolina, Leonidas Polk grew up in an environment where he learned the importance of family, religion, and morality. In 1823, Polk received an appointment to the United States Military Academy at West Point, hoping that his military service could rival his family's long military tradition, stretching back to the American Revolution and even the English Civil War. Polk excelled academically at the academy, graduating eighth out of thirty-eight. Yet, his stay in New York had a more profound impact on his life. He embraced Christianity, decided to enter the ministry, and received bap-

tism in the chapel on May 25, 1826, a first for a West Point cadet. Thus, when graduation day arrived, Polk resigned from the military and went on to enter the ministry, despite the objections from his father, William, who wanted his son to prove his masculine worth through military service.

In the fall of 1828, Polk traveled to New York City to study Hebrew and later entered the Virginia Theological Seminary. As he battled constant health problems that took him to Europe to recover, Polk eventually returned to the United States and received a tremendous amount of responsibility from the Episcopal church, with jurisdiction covering “Arkansas, Mississippi, Louisiana, coastal Alabama, the Republic of Texas, and other southwestern territories designated ambiguously as the ‘Indian Territory’” (p. 52). Earning the distinction of being elected First Bishop of Louisiana in 1841, he worked throughout his region, especially with other priests, highlighting the importance of participation in benevolent agencies. Amidst his religious devotion, Polk also married Frances Ann Devereux on May 6, 1830 and purchased a sugar plantation in Louisiana in 1841, the same year he was elected bishop. Polk came to own over 200 slaves, making him “among the seventeen largest slaveholding clergymen in the entire South” as he managed his plantation from 1841-1854 (p. 96). Polk eventually abandoned plantation work due to high debt, some of which resulted from a tornado that inflicted severe damage on his plantation in Louisiana in 1851.

Polk followed up his years as a planter with contin-

ued service to the Episcopal Church, now helping it select a plot of land for a new university in Tennessee. In 1856, the trustees agreed with Polk's suggestion for the University of the South to be established at Sewanee, Tennessee. As a founding member of the college, Polk worked to collect donations to form an endowment for the school from 1857-1860. He particularly focused on donations from other wealthy planters, which must have been assisted by his stronger defense of slavery, especially in the face of constant pressure from abolitionists. As the Civil War entered its first months, President Jefferson Davis offered Polk a military command at the rank of Major General three times; Polk declined twice before accepting the third offer.

Davis placed Polk in command in the west, which included many of the states he had worked in as bishop. He arrived in Memphis on July 13, 1861, setting up headquarters and planning to invade Kentucky, a neutral state. His invasion commenced on September 3. Despite the presence of Union and Confederate forces, the state of Kentucky ordered the Confederates out and sided with the Union two weeks after the invasion. Even with the mishap in Kentucky, Polk continued to garner notice with his military performance at Belmont, Missouri, Shiloh, Tennessee, and Perryville, Kentucky, and spent much of 1863 in Tennessee, where he criticized General Braxton Bragg's military capabilities and called for his transfer. Bragg, holding a grudge against Polk, suspended him after the Battle at Chickamauga in September 1863, charging him with "disobedience of the lawful command of his superior officer" (quoted, p. 181). Polk appealed and found himself transferred by Jefferson Davis to Mississippi. General Joseph Johnston would later ask Polk to join him and the Army of Tennessee in 1864 during the Atlanta Campaign.

Throughout his discussion of Polk's wartime performance, Robins notes his popularity among his fellow soldiers and officers. Polk performed death rites for Major Eddy Butler and officiated at the wedding of John Hunt Morgan. He also baptized General John Bell Hood on May 12, 1864, using rainwater collected in a tin cup, prior to the battle at Resaca, Georgia. During a strategy meeting at Pine Mountain, Georgia, on June 14, 1864, Union artillery shells began falling and as the Confederate officers departed, Polk was hit and killed instantly. His death shocked many within the ranks of the army and

several tributes arose from soldiers, civilians and officers. Polk would be buried in Augusta, Georgia, and later re-interred in New Orleans in the twentieth century, a more fitting burial locale for a man who had served in the state for several years as Bishop.

Polk's death does not end Robins's work, as he concludes with an assessment of Polk's legacy. Robins admits that Polk had only a mediocre military record, yet tribute after tribute praised him as one of the best and brightest leaders in the Confederacy. The author attributes this status to how the Lost Cause "enthusiasts crafted a positive image of Leonidas Polk because the bishop as general validated their contention that Southern slavery had not been immoral or exploitative but rather a means for Christianizing a less fortunate and docile race" (p. 215). Furthermore, Polk died on the battlefield, which seems to have erased many of his military blunders from the memory of soldiers and officers alike. Countering historian Charles Reagan Wilson's assertion to the contrary, Robins argues that the University of the South, one of the legacies left behind by Polk, "did not promote the Lost Cause as a type of civil religion" (p. 198). While former Confederates did work at the school, Robins notes that they isolated themselves from the New South and returned to an education system solely based on Episcopalian and Oxonian traditions. Thus, the University of the South may not have been as influential in propagating the Lost Cause as other historians have previously argued.

Yet, there were some moments, especially in the final section, where I wanted more from Robins. While he mainly touches on the Lost Cause and legacy building, Robins could have explored the memory of Leonidas Polk in greater detail. Are the tributes that portrayed him on such a high level a direct product of the Lost Cause? Did support for Polk come from the detractors of Bragg, who pointed the finger at Bragg for failure in the war? How does Polk compare to other religious leaders who fought in the war? Did the other religious leaders who owned slaves have to reconcile enslavement and Christianity in the same manner as Polk? These ultimately are only minor points of consideration. Robins has not only produced a new cultural biography well worth exploring, but he has also added a new dimension to the historiography of the Lost Cause and the meaning of the American Civil War in the minds and memories of Americans today.

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Citation: Brian C. Miller. Review of Robins, Glenn, *The Bishop of the Old South: The Ministry and Civil War Legacy of Leonidas Polk*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. October, 2007.

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