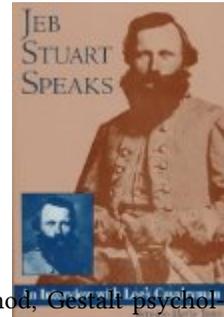


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Bernice-Marie Yates. *Jeb Stuart Speaks: An Interview with Lee's Cavalryman*. Shippensburg, Penn.: White Mane Publishing, 1997. xix + 84 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57249-041-3.

Reviewed by Jimmy W. Jones (University of Arkansas)
Published on H-CivWar (February, 1998)



Not often am I afforded the opportunity to sit down with long-departed legends. And it is even rarer to have an audience with ghosts so distinguished as James Ewell Brown Stuart. That Stuart's actions remain so controversial today perhaps is the cause for his unrest. The summer of 1863, and his essential tasks that season, ensure that Stuart will continue to be a most fascinating subject. He is one of those rare individuals in history that generates passionate debate. Stuart's character was sufficiently complex to serve as ammunition for both the supporter and detractor. It is also he, perhaps better than most, who illustrates the classic paradox southerners must face when examining the Civil War and the Old South. His values, as Emory M. Thomas demonstrates, were the things white southerners celebrated most about their culture in the war's aftermath. Yet, at the same time, it was those values that helped to bring about the very war that destroyed that culture.

Who J.E.B. Stuart really was, unfortunately, became secondary in the years after Appomattox. His life yielded to the romantic fantasy of the Knight of the Golden Spurs. Stuart thus makes an excellent subject for a rather unorthodox historical method. It is a method that hopes to let Stuart speak for himself, without the romantic filter of the Lost Cause, without the rhetoric of both his champions and detractors. In allowing "Stuart" this opportunity, Bernice-Marie Yates breathes life anew into the Virginian in this intriguing little book.

Jeb Stuart Speaks: An Interview with Lee's Cavalryman is not a biography of Stuart. It is simply an interview, a series of questions and answers between Stuart and an anonymous interviewer. Yates has, of course, a slight obstacle to overcome. J.E.B. Stuart has been dead for almost 134 years. She resolves this somewhat troublesome im-

pediment by using a creative method, Gestalt psychology. She adopts an "empty chair" technique to pose a series of questions to "J.E.B. Stuart." General Stuart's "responses" are based, primarily, on his letters and the testimony of Heros Von Borcke and John Esten Cooke. The result of this technique is an intriguing psychological portrait of both Stuart and his age, one which illustrates well the enigma of both the man and the Old South.

These conversations with Stuart take place in three sessions. The settings of the interviews are the least believable aspect of the book. One might expect the interviews to take place on a network news magazine program amidst a focus group asking Stuart's opinion of late twentieth-century America, the internet, or how Elvis and Jimi Hendrix are faring in the afterlife.

In all seriousness, the first interview is conducted at the United States Military Academy sometime during the winter of 1995. This first session with Stuart is devoted to a brief discussion of his childhood, family, and education at West Point. Its brevity, which no doubt can be attributed to a lack of primary material, is somewhat disappointing. Yet for what the chapter lacks in volume, Yates compensates for in ambience. Stuart's deep religious convictions, his boyish playfulness, and his sense of destiny all emerge in these few short pages.

The second interview, conducted at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, explores Stuart's pre-war military career. "General Stuart" describes his adventures in the West, his role in the capture of John Brown, and how he came to choose Virginia over the Union. As this interview takes place in the present, it would have been interesting to read what "reaction" Stuart might have had if presented with the moral implications of slavery more forcefully. Yet, when questioned, Stuart appears to have a

general intellectual detachment from the subject. When our interviewer pushes him for an answer as to how he feels about the institution, Stuart's response is to justify slavery on religious grounds. He has little passion for the matter. I did expect Stuart's ambition, which may have been the most important element of his character, to surface more in this chapter, and there are places where it does. He states, for example, that he would have been mortified had the Virginia legislature decorated Israel Green, to his exclusion, for the capture of John Brown. But for the most part, Stuart appears more as Cincinnatus than as the ambitious youth from Patrick County that one expects.

The concluding interview, which comprises the bulk of this rather short book, takes place just outside Culpeper, Virginia, at Brandy Station. Here Stuart and our interviewer conclude their discussions. The topic is Stuart's service in the Army of Northern Virginia. It is telling, I believe, that the setting is Brandy Station. It was here that Stuart's mostly stainless military reputation was first tarnished. One of the strongest assets of Yates' book is the interplay between reader and author. My first question was, why Brandy Station? Does Yates suggest, by choosing this place, that she believes this to have been the turning point in Stuart's career, and perhaps that of the Confederacy as well? Does she mean to resurrect, as others would, Stuart's image by vindicating his actions here? The answers to these questions are elusive. Yet the setting prevents me from reading passively.

The final interview is a pleasant mixture of anecdote and matters more grave. Stuart dismisses all accusations of his rumored womanizing and recalls, with no small measure of pride, his "Grand Rounds" of McClellan's army in 1862. Many of the interviewer's questions in this final chapter permit Stuart to recreate the aura that surrounded service in the Confederate cavalry. Champions of the Lost Cause did not have to look far to find someone who so perfectly fit their requirements. Stuart's views on a gentleman's place in southern society mirror that of most Lost Cause writers. At times the modern reader comes to question whether or not Stuart's ideas about personal honor and glory, might have been in conflict with the ultimate goals of the Confederacy.

As the discussion turns toward Brandy Station, Stuart becomes more rigorous in his defense. With regard to that battle, Stuart claims, "I lost no paper—no nothing—except the casualties of battle" (p. 63). The interviewer does not press Stuart, to my great distress, but allows him to move on to the events leading up to Gettysburg.

And here "the question" is finally asked. "Some say," the interviewer begins, "that you prevented a Confederate victory at that battle. How do you answer these critics" (p. 65)? Stuart responds by describing his course of action and concludes by stating, "We got the better of the fight at Gettysburg but retired because the position we took could not be held." His defense is that the Army of Northern Virginia did not lose at Gettysburg. Most recent scholarship tends to limit the significance of that July engagement. Certainly, Lee's army was not defeated at Gettysburg. To claim that the battle was a Confederate victory, however, only underscores Stuart's inability to admit defeat and obscures his actions and judgment leading up to that moment.

It is too simplistic, I believe, to say that Stuart caused the South to lose at Gettysburg. Yet to absolve himself in this way is not necessary. The weight of his achievements overwhelm the burden of this one defeat. Then, too, there is one last telling comment in his remarks on Gettysburg, one that may demonstrate his state of mind during the campaign. With regard to his raid, Stuart claims, "We had paid [George] Stoneman in compound interest" (p. 65). But paid him for what? The raid during the Chancellorsville campaign? Or perhaps the raid on Stuart's character and ability that was the result of Stoneman's actions, the question that echoed in one Virginia newspaper: "Where was General Stuart?"

Jeb Stuart Speaks is one of those books that a reader expects to find fault with. There are a number of fine works on Stuart already on the shelves. This one is short. Its method is not one most historians would employ. Yates omits, moreover, what I consider to be the best book on the subject, Emory Thomas' *Bold Dragoon: The Life of J.E.B. Stuart* (1986). Nevertheless, I thoroughly enjoyed both the book and the method used to recreate Stuart. If there is any methodological problem here, it lies in Stuart's own character. He was constantly at work to create and sustain an image that masked his identity. By bringing him back to life, by phrasing his answers based on his letters and the words of men who knew him best, Yates allows Stuart to continue to play that role, to continue to evade scrutiny.

It is important to remember that this is not a biography of Stuart. Nor should the book be compared to biographies of him. Rather, it is a tool that allows Yates to recreate an atmosphere, to revive a character long dead. In that, she succeeds. Yates' book is not the first one a student should read about Stuart, but it does provide a valuable portrait of him. Stuart is able, despite whatever

reservations a reader might have at the start of the book, to “speak” through this vehicle. And that ability makes the book worthwhile.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved.

This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU. [The book review editor for H-CivWar is Daniel E. Sutherland <dsutherl@comp.uark.edu>].

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

Citation: Jimmy W. Jones. Review of Yates, Bernice-Marie, *Jeb Stuart Speaks: An Interview with Lee's Cavalryman*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. February, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1655>

Copyright © 1998 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.