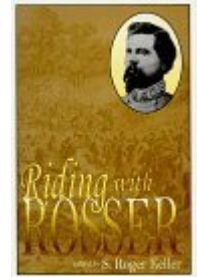


Thomas L. Rosser. *Riding with Rosser*. Shippensburg, Penn.: Burd Street Press, 1997. vii + 116 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-57249-066-6.



Reviewed by James Jewell

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As Bell Wiley demonstrated during his brilliant career, occasionally there is historical gold to be found in old family trunks. The surprising abundance of Civil War letters and diaries he unearthed through diligent work led many others to follow his example. That was the beginning of the current cottage industry of small presses publishing memoirs, diaries, and occasional letter collections from every conceivable type of Civil War veteran. After so many years, it appears that every noteworthy scrap of paper written by all prominent Civil War figures, and many less noteworthy, has been discovered and those deemed valuable enough for publication have been published. This then may explain why a memoir by Confederate General Thomas L. Rosser comes as a surprise to some historians.

The surprise, unfortunately, falls into the good news, bad news category. On the positive side, by publishing this material, editor S. Roger Keller and the publishers may invigorate deeper interest in one of Robert E. Lee's many fine cavalry commanders. The bad news is that due to the editor's apparent lack of expertise and standard research, the work is riddled with errors of

fact, and Rosser's sometimes debatable words are never questioned. All of which combines to present an out-of-context, muddled picture of Rosser, which may have the net result of actually keeping him in the historical background.

One may begin the questioning of Keller's knowledge by examining the slip cover. The inserted photograph of Rosser on the cover, Keller points out, was taken in 1862 while Rosser was commanding the 5th Virginia Cavalry. In the photograph the stars on his collar are clearly wreathed, thus dating it no earlier than October 1863 when he was promoted to general. While this minor point may actually be a mistake by the publisher, Keller is clearly responsible for the overly dramatic description of the material and summarizes erroneously the source of the disjointed narrative. Despite the editor's assertion that the book contains General Thomas L. Rosser's personal account of the Civil War (p. iv), the primary material in the text does not begin until after the 1863 Mine Run campaign. As for the source, it was not, as Keller guessed, clipped from a Charlottesville newspaper, but rather from three lengthy and controversial articles Rosser

wrote for the *Philadelphia Weekly Times* ^ÓAnnals of the War^Ô section. So suspect were Rosser's words that both Jubal Early and Thomas Munford shortly thereafter responded in that same paper, rebutting his bolder claims almost point by point. Clearly, neither man harbored any love for Rosser, but, as even a less than careful reading shows, they were certainly justified in questioning his accuracy.

Among other errors committed by the editor, he states that among the guests at Rosser^Ôs wedding to Bessie (Winston) Rosser, were numerous Confederate dignitaries, including John Pelham (p. 31). While the attendees would have enjoyed the youthful artilleryman's company, he had been dead for eight months by the time of the Rossers' November 1863 nuptials. More important are such errors as constantly referring to Thomas Munford as "general," giving Munford the promotion he deserved, but never received (p. 34). Equally significant are omissions in the endnotes, typified by the lengthy explanation of Five Forks. In this reference the editor gives a protracted treatment of the musical accompaniment of Union General Phil Sheridan's forces, but fails to make any reference to the infamous shad bake, where Pickett, Fitz Lee, and Rosser were off enjoying a fresh fish meal while their forces were routed (pp. 106-107). This lack of comment on that notorious incident only compounds Rosser^Ôs not too surprising similar failure to comment on the issue (p. 71).

That this work would have been more useful had serious research gone into its preparation is obvious. Had there been an attempt to balance some points (perhaps purposely) ignored by Rosser, then this book would have been a welcomed first person account. As it stands, the many flaws outweigh the value of Rosser's account of Trevilian Station and the Shenandoah Valley campaign. That Rosser^Ôs career before the war is only lightly addressed and his life after, when he played an important role in railroad expansion

westward, receives only a brief overview further diminishes the book's worth. While individuals concerned specifically with Rosser^Ôs wartime career might excuse such omissions, the absence of any serious discussion of his Confederate service prior to fall 1863, from his time as an artilleryman to his tenure as commander of the 5th Virginia Cavalry, further limits the book^Ôs value. Perhaps the most glaring omission is any reference to or use of Rosser^Ôs wartime correspondence, which is readily available in his family papers at the Alderman Library, University of Virginia.

Unfortunately, *Riding With Rosser* is the book that could have been. While enthusiasts might find something to like about this work, serious scholars, always on the lookout for new primary material, will find Rosser^Ôs penchant for not fully addressing his more controversial experiences and for more than a few inaccuracies less than informative and be disappointed with the editorial quality. This work demonstrates what frequently goes wrong with much of the material now being published by smaller firms such as Burd Street Press. (Its parent company, White Mane, has a somewhat better track record). In their rush to print similar manuscripts, publishers frequently do not realize that most remaining primary material is not worthy of being published no matter how great the editing, or as was primarily the problem here, they allow a substandard treatment to go to press. Unfortunately, there will continue to be a stream of similar material, from which we can be thankful to pull a few historical gems.

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