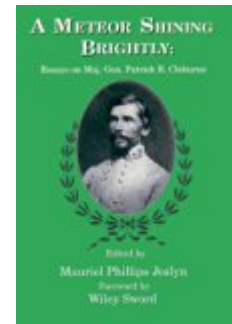


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mauriel Phillips Joslyn, ed. *A Meteor Shining Brightly: Essays on Maj. Gen. Patrick R Cleburne*. Milledgeville, Georgia: Terrell House Publishing, 1997. ix + 299 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-9662903-0-1.

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A Heroic and Tragic Figure

Recent months have witnessed a renewed interest in Patrick R. Cleburne. The February 1998 issue of *Civil War Times Illustrated* was largely devoted to Cleburne, and 1997 saw the publication of both Craig L. Symonds's *Stonewall of the West: Patrick Cleburne and the Civil War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas) and *A Meteor Shining Brightly: Essays on Maj. Gen. Patrick R. Cleburne*.

Though presented as a collection of essays, *A Meteor Shining Brightly* is more straightforward biography than interpretation. The eleven essays are presented in chronological order and discuss various aspects or periods of Cleburne's life from his early years in his native Ireland to his death at the battle of Franklin in November of 1864. The contributors to this volume include several professional historians, a retired military man, a journalist, and the great-nephew of Cleburne's adjutant. Each is knowledgeable about Cleburne and the Civil War, but the quality of the writing varies greatly. Some chapters are thoroughly documented and well-written, while others are burdened with an overabundance of the names of lower-level officers or overly long excerpts from the *Official Records*.

In some instances, authors need better documentation to support their assertions. For example, in her discussion of the debacle at Spring Hill, Tennessee, in which John Bell Hood held Cleburne at least partly responsible for allowing a seemingly trapped Federal army to escape, Alethea Sayers notes that "the majority of historians believe the fault should rest on the army commander, Gen-

eral Hood (p. 261)." But neither in her text nor her endnotes does she list those historians or their works. Similarly, in his discussion of the battle of Franklin, Thomas Cartwright strongly challenges Hood's version of his last conversation with Cleburne. In *Advance and Retreat*, Hood recalled that Cleburne's final words to him before the battle were "General, I am ready, and have more hope in final success of our cause than I have had at any time since the first gun was fired." But Cartwright contends, "If this was not an outright falsehood by Hood, the comment by General Cleburne was sarcastic at best. Most historians feel it was the former (p. 269)." Yet nowhere does Cartwright tell the reader who these historians are.

This reservation notwithstanding, Cartwright's essay on the battle of Franklin is one of the volume's better chapters. Cartwright, the executive director of the Carter House in Franklin, Tennessee, is one of the leading authorities on the battle of Franklin, and his expertise is evident here. His essay makes it perfectly clear that Cleburne knew Hood's plan for a massed frontal assault on the entrenched Federal position at Franklin was foolhardy and that the attack would mean certain death for many in his command. Yet, despite his misgivings and the animosity he felt toward Hood, Cleburne attempted to carry out the order with his usual courage and daring and gave his life in the process.

Another of the volume's better chapters is University of Arkansas at Little Rock historian Carl Moneyhon's essay on "Cleburne's Early War Years." Money-

hon contends that Cleburne's actions in 1862 "clearly demonstrated his leadership qualities" and "showed him to have traits of command and leadership that can be described only as natural (p. 86)." Cleburne was, he concludes, "born to command on the battlefield (p. 86)." Moneyhon's essay is crisply-written, and his endnotes reflect a thorough knowledge of relevant scholarship.

Perhaps the volume's most interesting essay is Mark M. Hull's "Concerning the Emancipation of the Slaves." Hull, an associate professor of history at Alabama A&M, clearly and concisely describes the most controversial action of Cleburne's career. In the winter of 1863-1864 Cleburne proposed that the Confederacy immediately begin training "a large reserve of the most courageous of our slaves, and further that we guarantee freedom within a reasonable time to every slave in the South who shall remain true to the Confederacy in this war (p. 146)." Cleburne assumed that patriotic Southerners would willingly give up their slaves if that was the price for Southern independence. "As events transpired," Hull notes, "it soon became clear that Major General Cleburne could not have been more wrong (p. 146)." Cleburne's proposal was met with rejection and rebuke by Confederate authorities and may have done severe damage to his chances for promotion. Ironically, the Confederate Congress passed a measure similar to Cleburne's in March 1865. By that time it was too late.

Hull's assertion that Cleburne "could not have been more wrong" about Southerners' willingness to give up slavery to save Southern independence is one of the few instances in the book where an author is willing to admit that Cleburne might ever have been wrong about anything, and that is one of the book's weaknesses. Craig Symonds (*Stonewall of the West*) paints Cleburne as an inspiring and courageous leader but also sees him as something of a romantic who uncritically accepted the rhetoric of Southern nationalists while failing to understand the crucial relationship of slavery to the Southern cause. Unfortunately that uncritical and romantic attitude has also characterized many who have examined Cleburne's life, including some of those who contributed to *A Meteor Shining Brightly*.

The authors continually hammer home the point that Cleburne was not only a skilled and courageous commander but a man of sterling character, much beloved and respected by the men who fought under him. These are points that few seriously challenge. But in this book, any criticism of Cleburne is written off or explained away. For example, Mauriel Phillips Joslyn notes

that "Cleburne's touchiness could frequently flare up (p. 191)." But she dismisses Gen. St. John Liddell's comment that "Cleburne was resentful, exceedingly ambitious, friendly to those useful to him, until they stood in the way of his advancement" as "a misreading" by someone "who had evidently not been accepted into [Cleburne's] inner circle of friends (p. 191)." "Cleburne was ambitious," Joslyn notes, "but never to the detriment of others (p. 191)." Never?

Even more disappointing is the book's failure to adequately address some of the more significant questions regarding this important and fascinating figure. Why was a man of such character, talent, and ability denied promotion to a higher command, especially in an army "bedeviled by command incompetence and operational mediocrity (vii-viii)?" In *Stonewall of the West*, Symonds cites several of the most commonly offered explanations for Cleburne's failure to attain the rank of corps commander—his foreign birth, his lack of a West Point education, his participation in the movement to oust Braxton Bragg, his proposal for arming the slaves—but finds them all unsatisfactory, particularly in light of the promotion of Benjamin F. Cheatham, who shared most of the same liabilities. Symonds concludes that Cleburne's superior, friend, and mentor, William Hardee, may have concluded that "while Cleburne was unquestionably a superb division commander, he lacked that spark of independent initiative necessary to be effective in the command of a corps.... It may be that Hardee had come to believe that for all his virtues, Cleburne had reached his proper rank as a major general (Symonds, p. 223)." Symonds further notes that in the one instance in which Cleburne was in command of a corps (at Jonesboro, Georgia, in the Atlanta campaign) the results were disappointing (Symonds, 239).

This is a controversial assertion and one that deserves closer examination. But aside from Wiley Sword's statement in the foreword that Cleburne was the victim of "internecine political maneuvering (viii)," *A Meteor Shining Brightly* adds little to the discussion.

Another issue that calls for closer examination is the question of why Cleburne, a man of such obvious intelligence, so completely failed to understand the region and the cause for which he fought. Hull discusses some of the possible explanations for Cleburne's proposal to emancipate slaves in return for their service to the Confederacy, but he fails to explain how Cleburne could have so misread his adopted region.

In his foreword, Wiley Sword writes, "The story of Pat

Cleburne is... one of the most notable and fascinating, if tragic, of the war (viii)." But the real tragedy goes far beyond Cleburne's failure to gain the promotion many felt he deserved and his untimely death. Cleburne gave his life in a useless battle, following orders he knew to be wrongheaded, from a commander whose competence he questioned, dying for a cause that he never fully under-

stood. That, it seems, is the ultimate tragedy of Patrick Cleburne.

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