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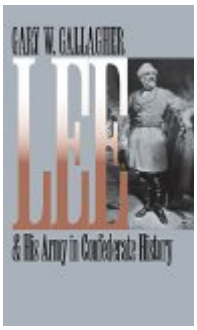
**Gary W. Gallagher.** *Lee and His Army in Confederate History.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. xviii + 295 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2631-7.




**Reviewed by** Brian Dirck

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Throwing out the Lost Cause Bathwater

Gary Gallagher moves Civil War scholarship forward by looking backward, so to speak. He questions those who have discarded out of hand the received wisdom on various Civil War subjects. His forte is Confederate history, and in that area his talents are particularly valuable, for probably in no other area of American history is there quite so much received wisdom, nor so many historians who have assaulted that orthodoxy with such gusto. This is because traditional interpretations of Confederate subjects are entwined with the white South's Lost Cause mythology and its thick patina of romantic white supremacy, which is of course anathema to most academic historians.

Many modern-day neo-Confederates conflate their veneration of the Confederacy with approval of the South's racial caste system, so it is possible to construe any positive interpretation of Confederate history--admiration for the fighting qualities of Confederate soldiers, for example--as a de facto expression of racism. But Gallagher believes it is also possible to construct valid scholarly arguments that mirror some elements of the Lost Cause mythos without implicitly accepting the racist sentimentality lying at the heart of that mythos.

In his 1997 book *The Confederate War*, Gallagher argued that the Lost Cause explanation for the South's defeat--Yankee bullets, not a failure of Confederate will--was essentially correct. "Although class tension, unhappiness with intrusive government policies, desertion, and war weariness all form part of the Confederate mosaic," he wrote, "they must be set against the larger picture of thousands of soldiers persevering against mounting odds, civilians enduring great human and material hardship in pursuit of independence, and southern white society maintaining remarkable resiliency until the last stage of the war."[1] Gallagher argued that, in their zeal to rid Civil War scholarship of Lost Cause racism, many scholars inadvertently jettisoned valid insights by Lost Cause devotees along with their less savory arguments about race and slavery.

This same philosophy animates *Lee and His Army*. Robert E. Lee has always played a central

role in the development of the Lost Cause mythos, and subsequently he has also been a favorite target of those who wish to loosen the hold of neo-Confederate Lost Cause stalwarts. Alan T. Nolan, one of Lee's foremost critics, wrote of Lee's immunity to real criticism because "there exists an orthodoxy, a dogmatism, in the writing about him. The dogmas pertain not only to the general himself. They also extend to the context of his life and to the causes, conduct, and consequences of the Civil War."[2] Thus to question Lee's greatness is to question central tenets of the Lost Cause mythology itself, and vice versa.

With this in mind, Gallagher's collection of essays asks whether the purveyors of the Lost Cause mythology were correct in creating a portrait of Lee as the Confederacy's greatest general. "Can we accept part of what Lost Cause authors said about Lee and his army without also lending a measure of authority to their denial of slavery's centrality to secession and the Confederacy?" Gallagher asked (p. xi).

Gallagher offers as an answer three broad arguments. First, he believes that Lee was in fact an effective combat leader who possessed extraordinary tactical and strategic ability. Second, Lee was a highly respected and revered figure for most white Confederates. He was the Confederates' "primary national hero," according to Gallagher (p. 33). This perspective contradicts arguments advanced by Nolan and others who believe that the Lee myth was a creation of postwar Southerners. Third, Lee possessed a multifaceted, modern conception of Civil War combat that took into account the interplay between politics and the battlefield, and who well understood the importance of events outside the war's eastern theater. Again, this runs counter to current trends in Confederate scholarship that suggest Lee was deficient as a strategist and failed to understand the relationship between war and civilian morale. Not so, argues Gallagher, who wrote that Lee "frequently manifested a grasp of how military events could influence politics and civilian morale in ways beneficial to the Confederate cause" (p. 71). In short, Lee certainly was the Confederacy's greatest general.

In proving this point, Gallagher offers essays ranging across a wide variety of issues and events: Lee's conduct at the battles of Spotsylvania and Chancellorsville, Confederate homefront perceptions of his defeats at Antietam and Gettysburg, and the prospects for Confederate victory during the bloody summer of 1864, when Lee was forced into a defensive posture to thwart Grant's relentless drive towards Richmond. Gallagher also offered a nice historiographic overview of the Lost Cause literature on Lee by Jubal Early and Douglas Southall Freeman.

Different readers will find value in different parts of ***Lee and His Army***. For me, the heart of the book was chapter five, "An Old-Fashioned Soldier in a Modern War? Lee's Confederate Generalship." Here Gallagher addressed the longstanding arguments proffered by Lee's admirers and his detractors that the general was an old-fashioned, courtly gentleman--a "grand anachronism"--who fought a chivalric, limited sort of warfare that was inappropriate to the Civil War's harsh, modern realities (p. 151). Gallagher instead sees in Lee a man who understood modern warfare quite well. Lee "crafted a strategy based on a careful, if sometimes flawed, reading of the military and political situation," he wrote, "In short, Lee adapted well to the demands of a conflict that far exceeded in scope and complexity anything he or anyone else could have anticipated in the spring of 1861" (p. 163).

Gallagher cited Lee's expansive nationalism, his downplaying of narrow local concerns, and his support for modernizing (and necessary) measures like Confederate industrial development, and--most radical of all--enlisting African-Americans to fight in the Confederate armed forces. "Far from looking back toward the traditional South, he looked forward to a Confederate nation that in

many ways would little resemble the society into which he had been born," according to Gallagher" (p. 170).

Perhaps the least satisfying essay in the collection is chapter six, "'I have to make the best of what I have': Lee at Spotsylvania." Here Gallagher disputes a longstanding notion that Lee was too much of a gentleman in dealing with subordinates. As the English correspondent Arthur J. L. Fremantle put it, Lee's "only faults, so far as I can learn, arise from his excessive amiability" (p. 209). Gallagher effectively illustrates the shortcomings of this perspective, showing how Lee acted with decisiveness, and maybe even a bit of ruthlessness, towards manifestly flawed subordinates like Richard Ewell. But showing that Lee was not a softy is not quite the same thing as proving that Lee "possessed unusual gifts as a military politician" (p. 191). Lee did allow a smoldering resentment to grow between Ewell and his successor, Jubal Early, and, given the well-publicized feuds that occurred between numerous general officers in the Army of Northern Virginia, it may a bit too generous to credit Lee with an ability "to control destructive backbiting" (p. 221).

Still, these are comparatively minor criticisms. Every essay in the book is strong, and several are extraordinary. All of Gallagher's arguments are enhanced by his ability to effectively weld together military, political and social issues and events. ***Lee and His Army*** also strikes a nice balance in terms of its format. Essay collections are notorious for being either too narrowly focused, and therefore tediously repetitive; or (far more often) too diffuse, containing wildly divergent styles and perspectives that clank around in the book like mismatched toys in a poorly designed toybox. Gallagher's collection is eclectic, but not overly so, ranging across a wide variety of topics without becoming unmanageable.

Taken together, Gallagher's multiple arguments in ***Lee and His Army***, and indeed much of his scholarship as whole, constitute a plea to Civil War historians: don't throw out the baby with the bathwater. That is, in our zeal to rid ourselves of the unpleasant lies of Lost Cause mythology, we should be careful to avoid a dogmatic rejection of everything related to the Lost Cause. Sometimes, perhaps even in spite of themselves, Lost Cause writers did manage to get at the truth of Robert E. Lee's formidable talents. Gallagher sympathizes with those who would summarily discard the entire moonlight-and-magnolias school of Confederate history. "The idea that historians should take elements of the Lost Cause interpretation seriously is unsettling," he admits, "It places us in the awkward position of having to concede some points to the defenders of slavery." Nevertheless, he writes, "it is important to engage each part of the Lost Cause interpretation on its merits" (p. 276). This valuable collection of essays illustrates the wisdom of such an approach.

Notes

[1]. Gary W. Gallagher, ***The Confederate War: How Popular Will, Nationalism, and Military Strategy Could Not Stave Off Defeat*** (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 4.

[2]. Alan T. Nolan, ***Lee Considered: General Robert E. Lee and Civil War History*** (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 7.

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