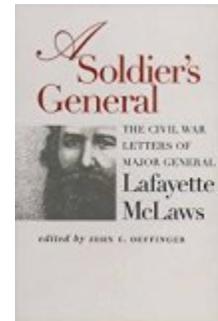


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John C. Oeffinger, ed. *A Soldier's General: The Civil War Letters of Major General Lafayette McLaws*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. xx + 299 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2690-4.

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The (Sloppy) Pen Is Mightier Than the Sword

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John Oeffinger's *A Soldier's General: The Civil War Letters of Major General Lafayette McLaws* provides a long overdue examination of one of the Confederacy's most capable yet often overlooked commanders. The reason for McLaws's historical neglect rests not in the lack of accessible primary material concerning his military exploits, for the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has held over four hundred of his letters for nearly three-quarters of a century. Researchers have shied away from this collection because of McLaws's nearly illegible handwriting. Fortunately, Oeffinger has painstakingly transcribed each document and compiled over one hundred letters and journal entries treating the general's Civil War experience.

Born in Augusta, Georgia, in 1821, McLaws experienced a comfortable childhood and attended the best private schools, all provided for by his politician/businessman father. In spite of his fine schooling, McLaws graduated from West Point near the bottom of his class in 1837. Over the next twenty-four years he served in the Mexican War and remote western frontier outposts. McLaws escaped the boredom, illness, and monotony of army life, thanks in a large part to the loving companionship of his wife, Emily (the niece of President Zachary Taylor), with whom he had seven children.

When his native Georgia seceded in 1861, McLaws resigned his commission and offered his services to the

Confederacy. He quickly rose through the ranks and achieved command of his own division in the Army of Northern Virginia by spring 1862. He distinguished himself during the major campaigns of that year and earned a reputation for his competence in battle and his attention to administrative detail. Unfortunately, his talents for cautious battlefield discretion led him to failure at the Battle of Chancellorsville, where his overly prudent nature prevented him from making a key assault and nearly prevented a Confederate victory. McLaws's division then bore the brunt of Lieutenant General James Longstreet's unsuccessful attempts to turn the Union left flank on the second day at Gettysburg, the planning and execution of which led to bitter resentment between the once childhood friends.

The growing animosity between the two generals climaxed in November 1863 when Longstreet relieved McLaws from command and charged him with neglect of duty after his failed assault at Fort Sanders during the Knoxville campaign. Believing the charges to be malicious and unfounded, McLaws demanded a court-martial and, after a trial, was eventually exonerated. He spent the remainder of the war in the Department of South Carolina and Georgia, charged with the defense of Savannah and hampering Sherman's march through the Carolinas. After the war, McLaws served in local political offices and dedicated much of his time to restoring his tarnished reputation and repairing relations with his critics.

Oeffinger demonstrates his excellence as an editor

not only for deciphering McLaws's handwriting but also for his copious and well-documented notations throughout the letters. His sixty-page introduction outlining McLaws's life and career provides a more than ample foundation for the subsequent correspondence. The letters themselves offer several interesting contributions, including the voluminous correspondence during his court-martial and his harsh criticism of Longstreet immediately after the Battle of Gettysburg. There are also a handful of less noticeable treasures in this collection. McLaws describes in detail the defense of the York-James Peninsula during the winter of 1861-62 and the campaign to slow William T. Sherman's advance through the Carolinas after the fall of Savannah, both of which receive comparatively little attention in Civil War historiography. The four antebellum letters, situated before the actual war correspondence, offer an extraordinary wealth of information on the U.S. Army's 1859-60 Navajo Indian Campaign in Utah territory.

The book's major flaw is in its bold contention that the McLaws letters "contain a wealth of opinion and information" (from the book's dust jacket) on numerous topics including life in the Confederate army, Civil War-era politics, and the Southern press. The general opines on Jefferson Davis, Richmond newspapers, the "loyalty" of Virginia civilians, and the Northern Democratic party; however, this rarely extends beyond a sentence or two or passing reference. With the exception of major diatribes against Generals Longstreet and John B. Hood, McLaws has little to say about other major commanders, such as Robert E. Lee, Thomas J. Jackson, or other celebrated contemporaries. He also leaves scant description, if any, of the numerous engagements on which he had built his battlefield reputation, such as the Seven Days, Second Manassas, Antietam, and Fredericksburg. Finally, the impetus behind the moniker "a soldier's general" does not stand out in the text of his letters. While he does make

one reference to poor medical care in the summer of 1861, he never otherwise mentions the welfare of his troops in battle, in camp, or on the march. Oeffinger's attempt in the introduction to substantiate McLaws's compassion for his troops relies on thin evidence, such as a passage from an unidentified newspaper article and the engraving on McLaws's own tombstone.

On the whole, this collection of correspondence delves more into McLaws's personal life than his analysis of military or political affairs. While he may have held the great responsibilities of command, most of the letters McLaws sent to his family demonstrate human emotions similar to any enlisted man enduring the hardships of war: justifying the cause he fights for, pining (often incessantly) for letters from home, wrestling with the challenges of being an absentee father, and mulling the uncertainty of life after the war. If readers come away with any understanding of this man, it will be a realization of his overwhelming desire to have control over any situation or challenge that he confronted. His meticulous attention to administrative detail, demand for discipline in his troops, fear of taking dangerous risks on the battlefield, criticism of ineffective commanders, continual concern over his reputation and micromanagement of his children's upbringing are all behaviors that reflect his fear of being placed in a situation where he could not personally control the outcome. This attitude probably provides a better characterization of the general than either "cautious" or "defensive-minded."

A Soldier's General is a valuable contribution to the study of the Army of Northern Virginia and Confederate leadership and will be of interest to those examining battlefield-homefront connections during the war. While it sometimes falls short of what it promises, it is still a worthwhile read and an exemplary model of primary document editing.

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