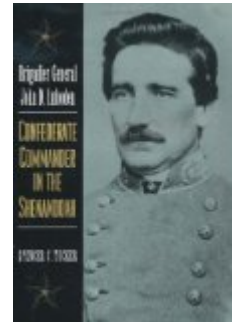


**Spencer C. Tucker.** *Brigadier General John D. Imboden: Confederate Commander in the Shenandoah.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003. xiii + 392 pp. \$32.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8131-2266-3.



**Reviewed by** Jeanne T. Heidler

**Published on** H-CivWar (January, 2004)

John D. Imboden: Civil War Zelig

The increase in the number of biographies of second- and even third-tier Civil War generals may strike some as the natural result of the proliferation of interest in the Civil War and some historians' attempts to find new material to satisfy that fascination.[1] However, in the case of Spencer Tucker's biography of John D. Imboden, as with most of these other efforts, biographies of the war's lesser-known figures enrich our understanding of the conflict through the especially accessible medium of biography.

With the notable exception of Harold R. Woodward's laudatory 1997 biography, *Defender of the Valley: Brigadier General John D. Imboden*, many Civil War historians regard John Imboden as a derisory figure, a consequence of his unseemly postwar habit of embellishing his role in the war's important events and key councils. By his own testimony, he not only witnessed the most important decisions made in the Eastern Theater, he also occasionally influenced them as well. To bolster such claims, Imboden simply manufactured conversations between himself and the

likes of Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee to depict consultations that clearly exaggerated his part in strategic planning. Dismissing these claims as the boastful antics of a vain old man, many historians, including Robert Krick and James I. Robertson, discount virtually everything Imboden wrote after the war. A conscientious biographer, however, has now re-evaluated this evidence, and the results are Spencer Tucker's extraordinary efforts to cull fact from fiction in Imboden's writings on the war. In addition to this difficult labor, Tucker also delved into Imboden's correspondence and records prior to and during the war, and though his biography emphasizes Imboden's military activities, its assessment of his civilian life provides the reader with insights into this interesting character's motivations.

Throughout the book, Tucker seeks to set Imboden's life into the broader context of the antebellum period, the Civil War, and the postwar era. For the most part, he is successful, but occasionally the endeavor sounds a discordant note. Making the statement that Imboden chose to support "the more liberal Whigs" instead of "the conservative

Democratic Party" (p. 7), somewhat confuses complex antebellum political positions by using labels that readers might infer connote current political stances. Moreover, this section rather oversimplifies the issues of the 1850s and ignores important national and sectional questions over which Whigs and Democrats wrestled. For example, Democrats were hardly conservative about territorial expansion, and southern Whigs, who by necessity eventually gravitated to the conventional rectitude and political nostalgia of Constitutional Unionism, could hardly be characterized as philosophically liberal. Disregarding the intricacies of the 1860 Democratic National Convention in Charleston, Tucker concludes that Jefferson Davis was responsible for splintering the party, an interpretation that most students of the event will find peculiar (p. 18). And readers will doubtless wish that Tucker had spent more time explaining the variances in northern and southern economic philosophies to better elucidate Imboden's active involvement in economic developments, especially after the war. That said, it should be noted that Tucker consistently succeeds in the difficult task of describing Imboden's limited role in titanic events without allowing them to eclipse his subject, deftly relating Imboden's part in political events, economic developments, and military episodes with admirable dexterity and a clear focus.

As mentioned, discerning truth from invention in Imboden's postwar writings was certainly this biographer's greatest challenge. Tucker combed through eyewitness accounts and reliable official reports of military engagements in what must have been an especially frustrating undertaking. The scarcity of records sometimes obscured Imboden's activities and his postwar writings intermittently disagreed with his contemporaries' statements. Tucker accepts Imboden's word perhaps more than other historians would think wise, but he also maintains a healthy skepticism. Tucker, for instance, regards as extremely dubious Imboden's claim that he had an intimate

conversation with Stonewall Jackson on the morning of June 9, 1862, at Port Republic. Biographer Harold R. Woodward accepted Imboden's version of those events, but Tucker points out that aside from the improbable time at which Imboden placed the event, neither the subject nor the tone of the alleged conversation was characteristic of Jackson's temperament (pp. 88-89).

An expert on Civil War artillery and ordnance, Tucker confirms that he is one of our best narrative military historians when he describes his subject in action. Tucker excels in describing Imboden's role in the early artillery duels of the war and his decision in early 1862 to form a mixed partisan force. Operating in western Virginia, Imboden's highly mobile unit, composed mostly of cavalry and mounted infantry, successfully disrupted Union communications and supply lines while temporarily deterring Unionist efforts in the region to form a pro-Union state government. Tucker effectively shows how Confederate raiders like Imboden were effective in deceiving Union forces and confusing their communications while simultaneously securing much needed supplies for the Confederate war effort.

The irregular nature of such partisan warfare often brought out the worst in Imboden's men, behavior that someone from his upper-middle-class roots and corresponding social standing found repellant. Imboden strained to discipline his partisans, for example stopping, as much as he could, the looting of homes and the plundering of businesses. Imboden, in fact, took rank with many Southern leaders who saw the war as a way to maintain order by preventing the chaos of potential slave uprisings and democratic upheaval. Yet, just as they threatened to create the very chaos they feared by turning armed men of lower social classes loose on the countryside, harshly disciplining a partisan force could disaffect it in a matter of days. Imboden never mastered the subtlety of control that could transform an ill-disciplined rabble prone to lawlessness into well-disciplined reg-

ulars, a fact borne out by senior regular officers routinely criticizing his failure to impose even the rudiments of military discipline.

Undisciplined as it was, Imboden's force was frequently effective in fulfilling its primary mission. Tucker does a commendable job in assessing Imboden's most famous raid into Union territory, the Imboden-Jones Raid of April-May 1863. The raid derailed the Unionist drive for statehood in western Virginia, caused the diversion of Union troops from surrounding regions, destroyed several key railroad bridges (the work of Brigadier General William E. Jones's force) that temporarily crippled the B&O Railroad in the area, and captured supplies desperately needed by the struggling Confederacy. Such successes, however, were both fleeting and more than offset by a lawlessness that convinced many embittered western Virginians that Confederates were simply rapacious predators.

Absent from most of the Army of Northern Virginia's major campaigns during 1862 and early 1863, Imboden's exploits in the Shenandoah Valley and western Virginia chiefly performed a supporting role for operations to the east. During the summer of 1863, he assumed a more direct function when his partisan cavalry helped screen the Army of Northern Virginia as it invaded Pennsylvania. Imboden did not participate in the Battle of Gettysburg (his force did not arrive until July 3), but he played a major part in guarding the Confederate retreat and on July 7, 1863, fought off a determined attack by John Buford's vaunted cavalry at Williamsport. Though no mean feat, Imboden unwittingly diminished the achievement by reverting to his chronic tendency to exaggerate the numbers he faced in repelling Buford's assault.

Even more chronic was his men's lack of discipline, a situation made worse by Imboden's habitual permissiveness. By the time he was placed under Lt. Gen. Jubal Early in 1864, some officers openly recommended that Imboden's force be dis-

banded, but the manpower-strapped Confederacy kept it intact. Imboden and his men thus had the opportunity to perform well at New Market and Lynchburg. Shortly afterward, however, an attack of typhoid fever forced Imboden from command and changed the direction of his Confederate service. His return to active duty saw him dispatched to the Deep South by the Confederate War Department to help administer prisoner of war camps, a task that was as thankless as it was hopeless, especially as Imboden sought to ease the suffering of prisoners in the infamous camp at Andersonville. Tucker clearly analyzes the incredible supply problems that plagued southern administrators as they tried to feed and shelter prisoners while coping with the labyrinthine bureaucracies of both the Confederate and U.S. governments. Tangled in this ghastly web of disease, starvation, and ineffectual officialdom, Imboden's most heroic efforts could not improve the appalling state of affairs in the squalid camps.

Tucker explains how Imboden typified the southern elite in his attempts to find a function in the very different world that defeat created in the South. He succeeded better than most, especially because he exhibited a willingness to put away the past and focus on the future. He became one of Virginia's most avid promoters for the "New South" long before the phrase came into use, advocating economic development, railroad construction, mining, and industry with such zeal that he inspired other entrepreneurs and unquestionably aided the economic recovery of the state.

Well written and persuasively argued, Spencer Tucker's biography of John D. Imboden provides a new look at the life of a fascinating man and the turbulent times he lived through. Some will perhaps lament the dearth of material about Imboden's personal and family life, but the sources seem scarce on this subject. Instead, Tucker has painted a vivid picture of how a figure of arguably limited importance in shaping the great

affairs of his day nonetheless coped with them as best he could.

Note

[1]. To name a few: Mary Daughtry, *Gray Cavalier: The Life and Wars of General H. F. "Rooney" Lee* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2002); C. L. Bragg, *Distinction in Every Service: Brigadier General Marcellus A. Stovall* (Shippensburg: White Mane Books, 2002); and Paul Anderson, *Blood Image: Turner Ashby in the Civil War and Southern Mind* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

**Citation:** Jeanne T. Heidler. Review of Tucker, Spencer C. *Brigadier General John D. Imboden: Confederate Commander in the Shenandoah*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. January, 2004.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8745>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.