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Although Elizabeth R. Varon addresses James Longstreet’s entire life, the subtitle of her work, *The Confederate General Who Defied the South,* indicates her primary interest. Her well-written and engaging study, the product of meticulous research, provides the most nuanced examination to date of the man who became a scapegoat for the Lost Cause, blamed for the South’s defeat at Gettysburg and by extension the loss of the war. But rather than the somewhat embittered and sometimes naïve postwar figure portrayed by many biographers, including this writer, Varon sees Longstreet as a savvy and articulate defender of his military reputation once it came under attack. She also asserts that Longstreet played a far more significant role in Reconstruction politics than previous works indicate. Her conclusions are based in part on a large number of postwar newspaper articles about Longstreet and interviews with him not used by previous biographers.

Readers should consider a reviewer’s perspective. This reviewer is the author of a 1987 biography, *Lee’s Tarnished Lieutenant: James Longstreet and His Place in Southern History,* supported the Longstreet Memorial Fund that placed a statue of Longstreet at Gettysburg, and is a member of the current Longstreet Society. Varon acknowledges the work of recent Longstreet scholars, particularly Jeffery Wert, *General James Longstreet: The Confederacy’s Most Controversial Soldier* (1993), Alexander Mendoza, *Confederate Struggle for Command: General James Longstreet and the First Corps in the West* (2008), and Corey M. Pfaar, *Longstreet at Gettysburg: A Critical Reassessment* (2019). Her work provides the first full, detailed study of Longstreet’s participation in Reconstruction since the publication in 1952 of Donald Bridgman Sanger and Thomas Robson Hay’s *James Longstreet: I: Soldier; II: Politician, Officeholder, and Writer.* Varon disagrees with these biographers on various points, but like them
she refutes the politically motivated writings of Longstreet’s avowed postwar enemies, as well as the biased Lee Cult writings of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Varon considers Longstreet an important figure because he “confounds our labels and forces us to confront the haunting complexity of Southern history—and the elusiveness among Southerners over the meaning of the Civil War” (p. xx). She portrays Longstreet’s life in three acts. He was first a Confederate warrior, fully committed to slavery and white supremacy. But in a second act, he accepted Confederate defeat and participated in Reconstruction in Louisiana, defending limited civil rights for African Americans. Third and finally, he retreated from the chaos of Louisiana to Georgia. There he exhibited less support for African American rights and made himself a herald for national reconciliation.

Varon sees Longstreet as a product of the plantation South, shaped by the proslavery ideology of his beloved uncle, Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, a prominent defender of state rights and white supremacy. Although Longstreet later portrayed himself as a reluctant Confederate, he sought a Confederate position before resigning from the United States Army in 1861. Longstreet became a Southern national hero in the first two years of the Civil War, a conflict he saw as an obligation of honor to defend white supremacy. His speeches to his troops portrayed the war as a defense of the South against racial pollution and the violation of women and children. Moreover, Longstreet participated in re-enslaving African Americans captured during the Pennsylvania campaign of 1863. He was critical of some aspects of the Southern war effort, but not its aim of establishing an independent slaveholding republic.

When covering Longstreet’s wartime performance, Varon endorses the older scholarship of Sanger and Hay and Jeffrey Wert more often than the revisionists Mendoza and Pfaar. Surprisingly, she does not engage the important work of military historian Harold M. Knudsen, author of General James Longstreet: The Confederacy’s Most Modern General (2010). Varon credits West Point instructor Dennis Hart Mahan with instilling in Longstreet a Jominian understanding of war, particularly the admonition “that one of the key tests of a leader’s character was whether he could resist having ‘too great a contempt for the enemy’” (p. 7). This and a preference for defensive tactics influenced Longstreet’s relationship with Lee and shaped his postwar assessment of Lee’s generalship. Other biographers have fully refuted the notion that Longstreet was inordinately ambitious. Varon focuses instead on Longstreet’s loss of confidence in Southern leadership and the chances of victory, particularly given the Confederacy’s logistical failings.

More than any other factor, Varon stresses Longstreet’s relationship with Ulysses S. Grant, his friend at West Point and during the Mexican War. They were related in that Grant’s wife was a distant cousin of Longstreet’s mother. Longstreet saw the failure of Confederate leaders to understand the threat Grant posed as a moral failure, and he was consequently demoralized. Longstreet was therefore dramatically impacted by the magnanimity Grant showed him personally at Appomattox, and by Grant’s lenient surrender terms. In accepting parole, Longstreet felt honor-bound to accept defeat and the victors’ prescription for Reconstruction. He also sought a peace with law and order, where his family would be safe and the South would have an economic future. Longstreet never explained how he was able to modify his fundamental assumptions regarding African Americans.

His chance settlement in New Orleans in September 1865 exposed him to that city’s complex race relations and its prosperous, educated Black leaders.

Longstreet’s decision to support Reconstruction and the white reaction against him have been well chronicled. Varon provides additional detail, stressing how closely Longstreet worked with
African Americans while he held patronage positions from the federal government and the state of Louisiana. He shared public space with Blacks and participated in freedom celebrations. As state adjutant general, Longstreet's leadership of all-Black and mixed-race units of the Louisiana militia and the New Orleans Metropolitan Police posed a fundamental challenge to white supremacy and assumptions regarding race. When Longstreet led them in battle against the Crescent City White League in 1874, he made himself anathema to Confederate veterans.

Varon charts Longstreet's shifting political views and fortunes as the deeply factionalized Republican Party sought to define itself in the postwar era. In the 1870s in Louisiana, and in the 1880s after moving to Georgia, Longstreet won and dispensed federal and state patronage to African Americans and whites alike. His understanding of politics at the local, national, and international levels varied, but it was largely astute, as demonstrated by his service as US marshal for the Northern District of Georgia, ambassador to Turkey, and US commissioner of railroads.

When the Sanger and Hay biography was published in 1952, the Dunning school interpretation of Reconstruction as a “tragic era” was still popular. Writing just over seventy years later, Varon places Longstreet in the context of historian David W. Blight’s *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (2001). Longstreet's actions in Louisiana and Georgia amounted to an Emancipationist understanding of the Civil War, for he demonstrated a sincere commitment to fundamental, if limited and gradually accomplished, civil rights for African Americans. Black leaders valued Longstreet's support, even while knowing its limitations. His support was recognized at the national level, even by Frederick Douglass. But toward the end of his life, Longstreet became a very important national symbol for a Reconciliationist position. While some dissented, many white Northerners lauded Longstreet for his willingness to accept defeat. Longstreet was the much-desired “reconstructed rebel,” acknowledging Union valor and the genius of U.S. Grant. Longstreet's postwar writings and his participation in Blue-Gray reunions reinforced the view that the war had been a struggle between honorable white opponents.

In discussing Longstreet's writings and the Lost Cause, Varon generally endorses the scholarship on the Lee cult and the anti-Longstreet faction by this reviewer and Thomas L. Connelly, author of *The Marble Man: Robert E. Lee and His Image in American Society* (1977). Varon, however, does not see Longstreet as his own worst enemy, tragically goaded by attacks on his military record into destructive displays of jealousy of the reputations of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. Instead, she emphasizes the care with which Longstreet crafted the interviews he gave, and the articles and memoir he wrote. In these Longstreet attributed the loss of the war to Confederate hubris, and particularly to Lee's loss of equipoise. Varon notes, “In choosing the image of balance (or its synonym *equipoise*) to conjure Lee's state of mind, Longstreet was drawing on a popular vocabulary, in his era, for describing the characteristics of military leaders. Soldiers and civilians alike saw equipoise as a key attribute of successful commanders” (p. 307). Furthermore, Varon asserts, “Longstreet seemed to attribute to Lee not overconfidence and overexcitement—an excess of qualities that in their proper measure were good and benign—but instead a willful, hubristic, and even sinister desire to impose his will and exact his tribute, no matter what the cost to his own men” (p. 308).

Varon's epilogue chronicles the efforts of Longstreet's second wife and widow, Helen Dortch Longstreet, to defend his reputation following his death in 1904. The Second World War interrupted and ultimately destroyed her efforts to place an equestrian statue of Longstreet at the Gettysburg National Military Park. That goal was accomplished in 1998 by the Longstreet Memorial Fund,
which was founded by members of the North Carolina Division of the Sons of Confederate Veterans. This reviewer, who is not a member of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, spoke at the dedication ceremony. The Memorial Fund focused exclusively on restoring Longstreet’s military reputation. Amid the current “overdue reckoning with Confederate memorialization,” Varon notes, some have suggested that as statues of other Confederate soldiers come down, ones honoring Longstreet’s postwar life should go up (p. 361). Surprisingly, Varon does not discuss the Longstreet Society, established in Gainesville, Georgia, in 1995, with the goal of honoring Longstreet’s postwar reconciliation stance. The Society’s challenges in attracting interest to nonmilitary, postwar aspects of Longstreet’s life are a revealing commentary on the memory of the Civil War.

Varon concludes that “Longstreet has never fit the profile of a marble man, whose life story could be set in stone. His political evolution and public image were too complex and contradictory for that” (p. 362). A fully dedicated Confederate, slaveholder, and white supremacist, Longstreet changed while his peers did not. “Longstreet’s story is a reminder that the arc of history is sometimes bent by those who had the courage to change their convictions. He accepted defeat with a measure of grace and tried to learn, and then to teach, the past’s lessons. And for that, he commands our attention as one of the most enduringly relevant voices in American history” (p. 363).

Thanks to the passage of time and previous scholarship, Varon is able to write about James Longstreet free from the dead hand of the Lee cult and the anti-Longstreet faction. Her work takes the front rank of amid modern Longstreet scholarship, which now exists in such depth and breadth that critical readers can consider a diversity of well-researched and thoughtful conclusions regarding him. An untarnished Longstreet makes for fascinating reading.
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