Current Books

Reviews of new and noteworthy nonfiction

The Confederacy's Marble Man

DUTY FAITHFULLY PERFORMED:
Robert E. Lee and His Critics.
By John M. Taylor. Brassey's.
268 pp. $18.95

THE MAKING OF ROBERT E. LEE.
By Michael Fellman. Random House.
360 pp. $29.95

Reviewed by Max Byrd

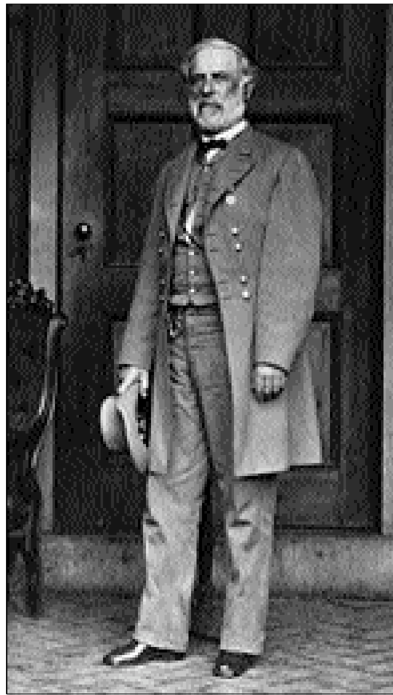
Robert E. Lee's famous nickname at West Point, given by a classmate who saw him riding by, was "the Marble Man"—a distinctly curious image to apply to an 18- or 19-year-old boy. It suggests a statue, of course, a military hero astride his mount, and it conveys a little of the awe that the young Lee's physical beauty and moral character seemed to inspire in everyone (astonishingly, he went through all four years at the U.S. Military Academy without receiving a single demerit). But it also suggests a cold, distant, inhuman figure of stone.

This is the contradiction that Thomas Connelly took up in his remarkable book *The Marble Man: Robert E. Lee and His Image in American Society* (1977). He concluded that the second interpretation is the right one, that Lee's legendary Victorian virtue, celebrated in a thousand marble statues across the South, was really no more than a terrible hardening of the heart, a chilly mechanical repression of all that was strong and vibrant in his personality. In the quarter-century since Connelly's book appeared, almost everyone who has written about Lee has begun by responding one way or another to this argument.

Rejecting the Connelly thesis, self-described "counter-revisionist" John M. Taylor offers a quick-paced, very well written short biography of Lee, concentrating (as befits the son of General Maxwell Taylor) on criticisms of Lee's strategy and tactics during the war years. He has a nice ear for quotation and anecdote. He gives due attention to Lee's weaknesses, especially at Gettysburg, where he thinks Lee should have listened more closely to James Longstreet, but he will have none of the charge that Lee was neurotic or unfeeling or, as John Keegan claims in *The Mask of Command* (1987), "of limited imagination." If there is a key to Lee's character, Taylor insists, sounding rather earnestly Victorian himself, it is his sense of Duty ("Stern Daughter of the Voice of God," as Wordsworth called it), "a secular manifestation of his religion," which "led inexorably to self-denial." Less readily explained, Taylor concedes, is how the outgoing young Lee turned into someone so private and severe.

As one of its many strengths, *The Making of Robert E. Lee* provides, if not an explanation, at least a wonderful series of slow-motion pic-

tures of that evolution from sociable, even ebullient young man to marble hero. Michael Fellman, a professor of history at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, begins with the familiar facts of Lee's unstable childhood, including its two examples of male self-indulgence and indifference to duty: Lee's father, the celebrated Revolutionary general "Light Horse" Harry Lee, who early disappeared from the boy's world in bankruptcy and disgrace; and Lee's scandalous half-brother "Black Horse" Harry Lee, who quite publicly seduced his wife's younger sister. And there was, of course, the great Roman-Virginian counterexample of self-control and virtue, Light Horse Harry's beloved commander, whom Robert E. Lee, leading his "nation" of Virginia into independence, would consciously emulate. "General Lee," remarked a sardonic colleague in 1862, "you certainly play Washington to perfection."



Robert E. Lee in Richmond (1865), in a photograph taken by Mathew Brady

Those who know Lee only as a paragon of military skill and virtuous self-denial, the Protestant Saint of the South, will be amazed by Fellman's account of just what Lee had to control and deny. He did not smoke or drink, rarely used rough language, and despised all forms of personal physical violence. When it came to sexuality, however, "he departed from what were by his lights nearly perfect habits." Lee married the daughter of George Washington's stepson, but Mary Custis seems not to have been a warm or particularly affectionate wife. To the end of his life, Lee kept up a number of flirtatious (and more than flirtatious) relationships and correspondences with attractive young women. To a friend's younger sister, he writes that he had been thinking about her on her wedding night: "And how did you disport yourself My child? Did you go off well, like a torpedo cracker on Christmas morning?" To another friend, he confesses that while on duty in St. Louis, away from his wife, he loved to be among pretty women, "for I have met them in no place, in no garb, in no situation that I did not feel my heart open to them, like a flower to the sun."

A second element of Lee's character also escaped his otherwise strong self-control. As he emerges in Fellman's penetrating narrative, the elegant, aristocratic Virginian comes to resemble more and more that most demonic prince of eros and aggression on the other side, William Tecumseh Sherman. If the Civil War ultimately made Lee into a tragic figure, it was not before he released in full measure his *rage militaire*, the deep pleasure in destruction that also possessed the Butcher of Atlanta. Nearly to the end of the war, Lee dreamed of the one great apocalyptic battle that would vaporize the enemy in a cloud of smoke and blood. As a general he was audacious, ruthless, furious. Gettysburg was no aberration, but the fullest possible expression of his aggressiveness. At Fredericksburg, as he watched the Union army stumble into a veritable slaughter, with 12,600 casualties in a single day, Lee turned to an aide and made his famous remark, "It is well that war is so terrible—we should grow too fond of it!"

The final years of Lee's life make gloomy reading. Fellman and Taylor both trace in some detail his performance as president of Washington College (now Washington and Lee) in Lexington, Virginia. Fellman devotes a number of thoughtful pages as well to Lee's rather sad

ideas on race, slavery, and Reconstruction. His last words, Taylor says, following the old Douglas Southall Freeman story, were "strike the tent." But the more skeptical and penetrating historian Fellman observes simply that Lee had suffered a stroke two weeks earlier and was almost certainly incapable of speech at all. In the college chapel, he adds, a statue was soon erected, sculpted "from white, white marble."

>MAX BYRD, *a professor of English at the University of California, Davis, is the author most recently of* Grant: A Novel *(2000).*

Requiem for a Dream

DEEP IN OUR HEARTS:
Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement.
By Constance Curry, Joan C. Browning,
Dorothy Dawson Burlage, Penny Patch,
Theresa Del Pozzo, Sue Thrasher,
Elaine DeLott Baker, Emmie Schrader Adams,
and Casey Hayden. Univ. of Georgia Press. 400 pp. $29.95

FREEDOM'S DAUGHTERS:
The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830 to 1970.
By Lynne Olson. Scribner. 460 pp. $30

Reviewed by David J. Garrow

For years, historians slighted the contributions of women to the civil rights movement. It was the women of black Montgomery who instigated the famous municipal bus boycott of 1955–56, for instance, but until the late 1980s historians credited the city's black ministers and other male activists. Although black women have been the most overlooked, scholars have also given short shrift to white women—including the idealistic young white women who worked in the early 1960s for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the most important if not the most heralded of the southern civil rights groups. Now nine of those women, led by Sandra Cason "Casey" Hayden, have joined together to publish their individual recollections. *Deep in Our Hearts* is a richly emotional and sometimes quite moving document, a tale of optimism, hope, and, ultimately, disillusionment.

"Our book," they write, "is about girls growing up in a revolutionary time." Most of them became active in SNCC in their late teens or early twenties. They found themselves in a small, close-knit, and warmly supportive organization, albeit one in which most white women were assigned office work rather than field organizing—in dangerous rural counties, the presence of white female activists would have further inflamed violent segregationists.

That loving and supportive world of interracial harmony began to deteriorate in mid-1964. SNCC and other movement groups recruited hundreds of new college students, mostly northern and primarily white, to help staff the massive Mississippi Summer Project. They organized freedom schools, registered voters, and mounted a powerful challenge to the state's all-white delegation to the 1964 Democratic National Convention. The new volunteers were enthusiastically received by most black Mississippians. Emmie Schrader Adams, in one of the book's richest chapters, quotes famed Mississippi activist Fannie Lou Hamer as saying that the "big thing about the summer of '64 was the people learned white folks were human."

As the locals grew more understanding, though, blacks on the SNCC staff seemed to