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Robert E. Lee: Icon for a Nation by Brian Holden Reid (Foreword by Julian Thompson), Weidenfeld & Nicolson Great Commanders Series 2005, 272 pages, 6 maps, 17 illus., index. £14.99. ISBN 0 297 84699 X

Review by Randal Gray

Brian Holden Reid, Professor of American History and Military Institutions at King's College London, has published a welcome 21st century reassessment of General Robert E. Lee (1807-70) 140 years after his surrender at Appomattox Court House. This shortish book is not a conventional biography but an analysis of Lee in terms of his posthumous reputation and a detailed commentary on his operations as commander of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia. That commentary covering almost three years, the author is at pains to tell us, is made in the context of Southern opinion *at the time*.

Holden Reid is already author of three histories of the 1861-5 conflict covering its origins and mid-nineteenth century warfare setting as well as co-editor of an essay collection of explorations and reconsiderations. Not many studies of military genius rest on such a firm foundation of recently published work, without also mentioning teaching and battlefield touring in the United States.

The first chapter rather than the last examines Lee's reputation since his lifetime in four respects: as the Great Confederate Captain; the *Chevalier sans Peur et sans Reproche*; the Confederate Washington (this earlier Virginian was Lee's conscious model and he had married the daughter of the first President's adopted son at the age of 24); and the American Hannibal because he was always outnumbered and defeated only after a long and cunning struggle. In this last section the author refers unfortunately to Flavinus Maximus Fabius instead of plain Fabius Maximus. (p.37)

Chapter 2 sketches Lee's 36-year-long military apprenticeship from West Point up to 1861. The Mexican War (1846--8) emerges as crucial in his development and not merely because Engineer Major Lee seized all opportunities for distinction and was wounded as US forces finally triumphed outside Mexico City. Above all Lee the staff officer was taught the value of the offensive by a heavily outnumbered army provided there was careful personal reconnaissance prior to the attack. Holden Reid writes of Lee's Virginian military mentor Lieutenant General Winfield S. Scott, the man who offered Colonel Lee command of all US (or Union) forces on 17 April 1861, that '...Scott had mixed caution with audacity. He disliked the defensive because he needed to *act*, to keep the initiative and to gain every advantage.' (p.60)

Early in his coverage of the Civil War Holden Reid overturns the traditional criticism that Lee was too preoccupied with Virginia and the Eastern Theater. Virginia had 45% of the officers who resigned from the US Army, more military age white men than any Confederate state, one-third of the South's railways, one-third of its manufactured goods and 44 per cent of its industrial financial capital. No wonder President Jefferson Davis moved his capital from Montgomery, Alabama to Richmond, Virginia. Furthermore Lee knew the rest of the South, he had commanded the US Department of Texas for most of 1860 and in the first year of the war spent long frustrating months in West Virginia (a failed autumn campaign), South Carolina and Georgia (organising coast defences).



On 1 June 1862, with the Federals only five miles only from Richmond, the 55-year-old General Lee succeeded the twice-wounded Joseph E. Johnston to the command of the Confederate Army of the Potomac. He immediately renamed it the Army of Northern Virginia and within a month had led it to a strategic victory over a much stronger and better equipped Union Army of the Potomac.

A short review cannot cover all that ensued. Suffice it to say, the author defends Lee's 1862 and 1863 invasions of the North because if the Confederacy could lose the war in the West, the East 'offered the only chance to *win* rather than not lose'. (p.165). Lee admitted to his own soldiers on the third afternoon of Gettysburg 'All this has been *my* fault--...it is *I* that have lost this fight.' (p.189) Both Stonewall Jackson and 'Jeb' Stuart, his most dynamic subordinates, were not present.

Lee's reputation in the South at the time and as icon of the Lost Cause was earned as much after Gettysburg as before. The Confederate commander supervised his remaining lieutenants more closely and consistently showed his engineering skill at siting and building field fortifications to mask and make up for his ever thinning ranks. As late as July 1864 his forces threatened Washington before the vital presidential election (that re-elected Abraham Lincoln). Lee had been anticipating this since even before his masterpiece battle at Chancellorsville in spring 1863.

Professor Holden Reid finds fault with Lee, the operational manoeuvre general par excellence, in only three areas, conducting sustained pursuit after victory and a tendency to over-confidence after successive victories. Third, like all Civil War generals Robert E. Lee did not make sufficient use of his staff in planning, but, one might add, even von Moltke in Europe had yet to establish his system.

This book too has very few failings. Lee's father, the talented but flawed Henry 'Light Horse Harry' Lee (1756-1818) died not in the West Indies but on Cumberland Island, Georgia. (p.47) The index and illustrations are good. Only the maps are inadequate but the missing places can be found in the pullout map of Virginia and Maryland and that of the environs of Richmond in G. F. R. Henderson's classic *Stonewall Jackson and the American Civil War* (1898). In lieu of endnotes there is a nine-page critical Guide to Further Reading. By 1996 there were '200 essential works on Lee'. (p.255). The author demonstrates his mastery of the torrent of recent publication on the Civil War which shows no signs of ceasing.