

The Marble Man: Robert E. Lee and His Image in American Society

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The Marble Man: Robert E. Lee and His Image in American Society, by Thomas L. Connelly. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977. pp. xv, 219. Notes and index. \$10.00.

General Robert E. Lee's image provides a model of perfection for Americans: his devotion to God and country were matched by hard work, honesty, and just use of power. He knew that war divided the nation and kept men from their families, and he sought to end this tragedy with military skill and to help restore the Union by patient endurance of Reconstruction. But was Lee so noble? Connelly argues that he was vastly different from this image and has evolved from a southern to a national hero.

Contemporaries of the Civil War recognized the General as one of many popular leaders. While they praised him for being a fine officer, they criticized his military blunders in early campaigns. Then, some late nineteenth-century Virginians fashioned him into the supreme southern military commander through their control of historical and literary outlets. These partisans made him invincible, blamed rivals including Stonewall Jackson and Jefferson Davis for the South's defeat, and made him a martyr to prove the superiority of southern life. In contrast, by 1910 the next generation who saw Lee as a virtuous American working for unity turned him into a national hero. This sympathetic portrayal grew during the southern renaissance of the 1930s. When Douglas Southall Freeman wrote Lee's biography in 1934-1935, the image of a simple, Virginia gentleman and military genius crystallized. Although this work remains authoritative, the Civil War's centennial brought a renewed outpouring of literature on Lee as a middle-class hero representing human virtues in an evil war.

In reality, Connelly shows that Lee found life difficult. For instance, unhappy relationships with his mother and wife caused many problems including obsessions with failing as a husband and father. But, as he brooded about family and career, he irrationally tried to do duty to the United States, the South, and family while placing his faith in God. Through exhaustive research, Connelly effectively illustrates the Lee image which emerged from newspaper, popular and scholarly magazine, manuscript, fictional, oral, radio, and poetic accounts of the General. Shortcomings of *The Marble Man* are the attempts to discover why the image developed and then to compare it with the real person, Robert E. Lee. Psychohistorical analyses such as this involve much speculation. Without adequate evidence, for example, Connelly largely attributes the image-building work of Lee's wife, the Lee Memorial Association, and Southern Historical Society President Jubal Early to either paranoid desires to sooth defeat or fanatical love of Lee. His efforts to uncover the General's personality also substitute guesswork for proof—he offers little indicaton that Lee felt inordinately frustrated as a son, husband, father or army officer. Unfortunately Connelly goes beyond what he is able to prove about Lee and his supporters.

—Julie K. Wilkinson
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