

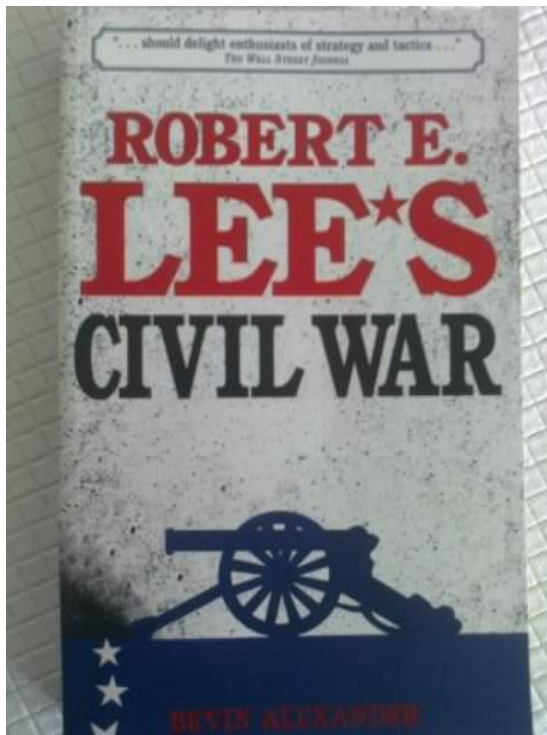
***Robert E Lee's Civil War* by Bevin Alexander**

Reviewed by Paul Le Long

This is a great book. It came out in 1999 so it has been around for a while but is well worth a look.

In essence it's a revisionist – iconoclastic almost – look at the generalship of Robert E Lee. The author takes a shot at the hagiography that one reads about Lee and presents him as a pretty poor general.

He accuses Lee of various mistakes, for example making too many costly frontal assaults which squandered the Confederacy's slender resources. And of having little strategic insight. According to Alexander, Lee always wanted to fight the enemy in front of him in an attempt at gaining a decisive Napoleonic style victory but without the wherewithal to actually achieve that decisive result. In the end, his style of command led only to costly attrition which could only result in a defeat for the south.



The author argues that Jackson and Longstreet both encouraged a different approach – make the enemy attack first, and when that attack failed (as it would because the defensive was stronger than the attack in this period), follow up with a counterattack, ideally with an advance on the enemy's flanks. But Lee would never heed their advice because he always became over-excited by the presence of the enemy to his front and always attacked like a grand old cavalier. I read a book recently on civil war generals by Joseph Mitchell which had a portrait of Lee, not as a kindly avuncular figure that we are used to seeing, but as a dashing young officer – very Napoleonic, very derring-do. This is the kind of character Alexander presents us with.

Ok, there are plenty of contentious points in Alexander's thesis, and if you look at the reviews on Amazon you'll find plenty of people tearing into the author, and it's true that he does push the boat out a

bit too far at times. I must say though that some of the reviews seem motivated by little more than outrage that someone has had the temerity to criticise their hero.

It seemed to me that the book was the successor to JFC Fuller's Grant and Lee, which is listed in the bibliography, but which is never mentioned in the text. One of the central arguments by Fuller (who is very critical of Lee generally) was that he lacked any sense of grand strategy, and was concerned to defend Virginia rather than the Confederacy as a whole.

Alexander doesn't explore this line himself in depth but the argument does explain some of Lee's behaviour throughout the war.

In his book, Mitchell argued that Lee was a great general despite making what looked like very poor decisions throughout the war – the reason: he always knew that the Federal generals he was facing wouldn't make him pay for these risks and that he could get away with it. When faced by Grant in 1864 though, he played it safe. Fuller was much less generous and so is Alexander. The latter is firmly of the opinion that Lee was simply wedded to the idea of the offensive, only belatedly came to embrace defensive strategy and tactics and even then was desperate to break out of the defensive posture he was forced to adopt in 1864. His Lee is a man in search of decisive victories over enemy field armies, and who had no interest in defensive strategy or in waging war on the population of the north or in playing for time to wear down the patience of the north. While Jefferson Davis wanted to survive long enough to force the north – out of simple weariness – to recognise the independence of the south; Lee was always chasing off after a chimera – the decisive defeat of Federal armies in the field. Ultimately this merely bled the south dry.



Whether you agree with the author's arguments or not, this is a stimulating and thought provoking read that by the way provides an interesting narrative of the war in the east from 1862-65.

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