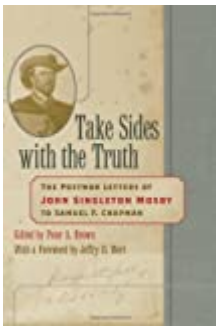
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



John Singleton Mosby. *Take Sides with the Truth: The Postwar Letters of John Singleton Mosby to Samuel F. Chapman.* Brown. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007. xii + 208 pp. $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2427-8.

Reviewed by Keith Altavilla (Department of History, Texas Christian University)

Published on H-CivWar (January, 2008)

A Man in His Time

With a friendship "forged in fire," Colonel John Singleton Mosby and Captain Samuel F. Chapman maintained their relationship long after the guns of Mosby's Raiders had gone silent. Mosby's letters to his longtime friend reveal as much about the time period as they do Mosby himself. The correspondence covers a wide range of subjects, showing his place as both a late-nineteenth-/early-twentieth-century gentleman, and also as a keeper and creator of Civil War memory. Mosby made no secrets of his opinions to Chapman, alternately criticizing and praising as he saw fit. Covering the period from 1880 to Mosby's death in 1916, editor Peter A. Brown's collection of Mosby's letters provides a glimpse into turn-of-the-century America, and the old soldier's continued attempts to find his place within it. The foundation for these letters is the friendship between Mosby and Chapman, begun during the time they served together in the Rangers, Mosby's Civil War command. Chapman rose through the ranks of Mosby's band quickly, earning several critical positions. After gaining command of the group's howitzer cannon, he served as its first adjutant, and later became a company captain. After the war, the mens' frinedship continued, as Mosby used his influence with Republican administrations to secure patronage appointments first for Chapman, then later for Chapman's son Willie. Brown uses his introduction and footnotes to the letters to effectively describe the ways in which the two men related to and communicated with one another.

Most notably, throughout the correspondence Mosby discussed the ways the Civil War should be remembered and understood. While most Southerners feared criticizing Robert E. Lee for the Confederacy's failings, Mosby urged Chapman, and others, to "take sides with the Truth," and not be afraid to remember events as they were (p. 97). It is from this letter in particular that Brown takes his book's title, and it is an appropriate one. Mosby made it one of his life's missions to detail the truth of the war, and his letters to Chapman describe reactions to his writings and lectures. In several letters, Mosby examined the result of Jefferson Davis's trial, showing disgust at those who refused to acknowledge the truth: that Davis was not acquitted, but instead had his indictment dismissed after being pardoned by president Andrew Johnson. Mosby openly acknowledged his role in the war, saying to Chapman at one point that, "I commit-

ted treason & am proud of it" (p. 100).

The letters also contain one of the most significant elements of their postwar relationship: Mosby's use of influence to obtain political appointments for the Chapmans. For example, Samuel Chapman received a recommendation from Mosby to the United States Army to serve as a regimental chaplain during the Spanish-American War. Mosby also used this influence for his own benefit, as he found work within various government offices in a variety of Republican administrations. As their fortunes changed, so did his own. In 1901, Mosby wrote to Chapman that "I have no political influence" (p. 47). Brown notes Mosby's failures to provide promised jobs as the years continued, as well as his successes. Such focus highlights the dangers in relying on the government for employment, and opens up avenues for better understanding the webs of influence required to obtain one of these coveted positions.

Mosby wrote many times of his opinions on politics. Before each election, he stated his preferences clearly and referenced particular issues he felt were important. In particular, Mosby took a strong stand against the coinage of silver. "It is simply a new phase of the old greenback currency," he wrote, "You can't make people richer by debasing the currency. If the people want cheap money give them old Confederate notes" (p. 33). He was also a dedicated party man, and stated his opposition to his political ally Theodore Roosevelt in 1912. Mosby declared his "(h)ope to get out in time â¦ & vote for Taft & against the Bull Moose" (p. 113). On several occasions, Mosby used politics to take jabs at Sam's brother William Chapman and his domineering wife Josie. When inquiring about William's positions, Mosby phrased the question as "how will Josie vote?" even though, as Brown points out, women at this time did not have the vote. Mosby later mocked the notion of women's suffrage, saying that "(i)f volunteers are called for I shall ask Woodrow to give me a brigade of suffragettes. They can then enjoy the man's privilege of dying for his country" (p. 124).

Brown makes a point of noting Mosby's caustic wit and character judgment; the letters do not disappoint. Mosby was not afraid to state his opinion of people he did not care for, and did so in no uncertain terms. In addition to the previously mentioned comments regarding Chapman's brother and sister-in-law, Mosby wrote of an old soldier comrade-turned-minister, "I suspect that Sid could send (& has sent) more people to Heaven by shooting at them than by preaching" (p. 31). He saved his sharpest rebukes for those whom he felt wrongly interpreted the war for personal satisfaction and gain, specifically targeting General Lee's staff officers: "There was a lying concert between them. I mean (Col. Charles) Marshall, (Col. Armistead L.) Long, & (Col. Walter H.) Taylor" (p. 76). Taylor in particular is singled out later as "the real villainâ¦. I have proved him to be a great liar" (p. 104).

The editor provides a strong introduction to the friendship of the book's main characters. The growth of Mosby and Chapman's relationship is detailed in a reprinted article from the April 2002 issue of *Southern Cavalry Review* titled "Forged in Fire." The backgrounds of the two men set the stage for the development of their friendship, and Brown effectively uses footnotes throughout the letters to remind the reader of these relationships. As the letters progress, and Mosby makes continued references to mutual acquaintances from their days in the Raiders, Brown identifies each one, as the letters demand. Brown uses the letters to sketch a picture of Mosby as a well-read and educated man, pointing out the soldier's references to the writings of Lord Byron, John Milton, and Jonathan Swift.

While this introduction provides a good basis for understanding the friendship between Mosby and Chapman, it leaves several other questions unanswered and open to interpretation. Mosby's membership in the Republican Party in particular is never directly addressed. For a prominent Confederate to side with the party of Lincoln begs at least minimal explanation. Brown skips this, mentioning only Mosby's friendship with Ulysses Grant as the source for some early patronage jobs. A brief discussion of Mosby's party affiliation would have shed light both on Mosby's influence within the party and, possibly, his later conflicts with other Southerners over the war's meaning.

In addition to a touching collection of correspondence from one side of a long friendship, Brown provides the reader with a glimpse of a man constantly working to find his place in the world. Beyond the detailing of his day-to-day work and gossip between friends, Mosby discusses the serious issues of his time. In particular, Mosby takes his self-appointed position as Civil War truth-teller with the utmost seriousness. Up to his final letter to Chapman, where he expresses the belief that his latest lecture "will be the final word on Stuart & Gettysburg," Mosby wanted to make sure that the real story of the war was told, and the proper parties celebrated or blamed (p. 153). Brown's collection provides good research material into the study of the time period, especially the continued fascination with the Civil War and one of its most colorful characters.

Citation: Keith Altavilla. Review of Mosby, John Singleton, *Take Sides with the Truth: The Postwar Letters of John Singleton Mosby to Samuel F. Chapman.* H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. January, 2008.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14026