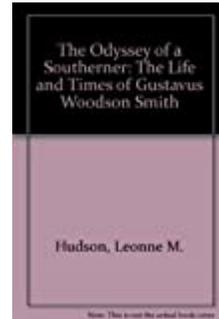




Leonne M. Hudson. *The Odyssey of a Southerner: The Life and Times of Gustavus Woodson Smith.* Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1998. 244 pp. ISBN 978-0-85554-589-5.



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Does Every Confederate General Deserve a Biography?

On November 17, 1862, President Jefferson Davis appointed General Gustavus Woodson Smith as the Confederate Secretary of War. The “only general then available in Richmond,” Leonne M. Hudson explains, “Smith was in the right place at the right time (p. 136).” However, four days later Davis replaced Smith with James A. Seddon. Smith’s short ad interim status raises the question whether every Confederate general and officeholder deserves a book-length study.

While it is unclear why no biographer has previously examined Smith, Hudson convincingly demonstrates that the Kentuckian led an interesting life both before and after the Civil War. Indeed, in many ways the four years of the war were not only the least successful but the least interesting of Smith’s life.

Previous writers may have shied away from Smith because of the apparent lack of sources. While Hudson notes collections of Smith’s papers in places as varied as the Houghton Library at Harvard and the Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library at the University of Georgia, none of these holdings seem to be large enough nor particularly revealing as they are sparingly referred to in

the work’s endnotes.

The lack of sources is especially evident in the discussion of Smith’s early years. All Hudson seems to know about Smith’s father Byrd is his ancestry, when he married his wife Sarah, that he was a veteran of the War of 1812, and that he was a tanner in Georgetown, Kentucky. Hudson notes Gustavus’ “quest for a place” (p. 6) at West Point, but he provides no direct evidence to prove the existence or explain the reason for this desire. Why the sixteen-year-old received a nomination to the Academy from Vice President and fellow Kentuckian Richard M. Johnson is never explained. Was Byrd Smith even involved in politics and did he know Johnson?

Once Smith arrives at West Point the record becomes more clear as the academy’s sources provide basic information about the cadet’s progress. The same is true in regard to Smith’s service in the Mexican War when Hudson effectively narrates events using reports filed by Smith. However, it is not until 1853 that the first letter written by Smith is cited. At this point Smith, who had been teaching at West Point for four years, was contemplating leaving the military. Hudson believes that there were a

number of reasons for this decision, but that “perhaps the most important one, was his desire to join the filibustering movement (p. 37).” Hudson describes how after leaving the army Smith went to New Orleans and “renewed his acquaintance with General John A. Quitman” (p. 37) as the two had served together in Mexico. Again, however, there is a problem with sources. Except for a single letter from Smith to a fellow Southerner dated February 21, 1855, there are no other primary sources presented which link Smith to the filibuster movement which could support or even explain why, as Hudson claims, that he was “obsessively committed to the invasion of Cuba (p. 38).” Hudson’s assertion that the “code of confidentiality” precluded Smith from revealing his activities is plausible. Again, the frustration is not having sources to explain why the Kentuckian was even attracted to the movement in the first place.

In some ways it is fortunate that in 1855 Quitman and therefore Smith as well never set off for Cuba because, Smith, now having to make a living, began to produce a clearer trail of his life. After initially applying his civil engineering skills to superintend construction of an extension of the Treasury Building in Washington, D.C. and then a new marine hospital in New Orleans as well as repairs of the Branch Mint in the Crescent City, Smith accepted the position of chief engineer with the Cooper and Hewitt Iron Works in Trenton, New Jersey. This position pulled him into the orbit of Democratic party politics in which his employers, Abram S. Hewitt and Edward Cooper, son of Peter Cooper, participated. This business-political tie allowed Smith to renew his earlier bond with George S. McClellan, who Smith had introduced to Hewitt, a member of the Illinois Central Railroad board of directors. After McClellan’s appointment as vice-president of the Illinois Central, Smith also was named to the firm’s board of directors. Indeed, Smith is credited with convincing McClellan to remain with the Illinois Central until the war began.

Smith’s employment with Cooper and Hewitt also was critical because when Cooper was appointed Street Commissioner of New York City Smith became Cooper’s deputy. Six months later, when Cooper resigned this post, he was replaced by the thirty-six-year old Smith. Again, because Smith accepted this position adequate sources were produced of perhaps the most interesting period of his life. In addition to his involvement in the repairs of City Hall and the construction of a market at Tompkins Square, Hudson skillfully documents Smith’s role as a leader of pro-Southern Democrats in the city and a vigorous supporter of the Breckinridge-Lane ticket

in the 1860 presidential race. The first few months of 1861 would seal Smith’s fate. In February, 1861 P.G.T. Beauregard wrote Smith from Montgomery, Alabama, to ask him to obtain ten cannons which would be used in New Orleans and Charleston. Smith not only assisted his former comrade in the Mexican War in procuring the equipment, but made it clear that he was willing to join the Confederate military if offered a commission. Of particular significance was the fact that two weeks before the attack on Fort Sumter, Smith was struck down by “a stroke of paralysis” which caused him to leave New York City and travel to Hot Springs, Arkansas, that summer to recover. It was during his health-related trip to the South that Smith went to Richmond and received his commission as a major general in the Confederate army. This would not be the last time there would be a link between Smith’s health and his military service.

Chapter Five, the longest segment of the book, traces Smith’s service in the Confederate army up through the Battle of Seven Pines when President Jefferson Davis appointed Robert E. Lee, rather than Smith, to take command of the army after Joseph Johnston was wounded. All previous writers as well as Hudson note that this decision was made after Davis determined from a conversation with Smith that the Kentuckian seemed unable to explain his plans for the next day. Hudson observes that Smith “was showing signs of nervousness and fatigue, not confidence. Under intense nervous strain brought on by the excitement of the first day of battle, Smith could not give a concise and conclusive answer (p. 110).” The next day, according to Hudson, “Smith suffered a mental or physical breakdown brought on by the strain of the fighting on the first day. Smith affirmed that he was completely prostrated by an illness he described as paralysis (p. 117).” While he reveals every source in regard to Smith’s condition, few original documents permit Hudson to shed much light on the general’s ailment. Though Smith’s illness continued for several weeks, apparently no medical records exist to provide any further insight into his condition. Strangely, Hudson does not relate what happened at this time to Smith’s illness the year before. Still, Hudson should be credited for drawing a very direct and larger point about Smith’s role at Seven Pines: “The battle also revealed a major weakness of the Confederate system of appointments which made a sick man of unproven competence second in command (p. 122).”

Chapter Six describes Smith’s brief term as Secretary of War in only slightly more than a page. Hudson raises some interesting questions about rumors that Smith might, in fact, have become a permanent Secre-

tary, but he does not go much beyond the existing secondary sources on this matter. The rest of the chapter deals with Smith's failed command at the Battle of Goldsboro in December, 1862 and, after his recall from North Carolina and his realization that he would never be given a significant command, his decision to resign from the army. Hudson points to Smith's February 23, 1863, letter to Davis "which was filled with bitterness and conceit." "This was the kind of memorandum that an egotist would be proud to display for all to see (p. 150)."

Chapter Seven, the last chapter on the war years, traces the circumstances in which Governor Joseph E. Brown appointed Smith commander of the Georgia militia in June, 1864. Following Smith's efforts to delay federal forces under General William T. Sherman, Hudson concludes that Smith's leadership in Georgia and particularly at the battle of Honey Hill in South Carolina, "was evidence that he was more effective with small units (p. 182)."

The book's final two chapters reveal Smith's postwar career until his death in 1896. Because Smith's service as

Kentucky Insurance Commissioner allows him access to many primary sources, Hudson places Smith's tenure in perspective of the southern and national insurance industry. Unfortunately, the coverage of the last dozen years of his life when Smith published a number of recollections of the war is a bit too brief given the fact that Smith's writings are somewhat distinctive in that he criticized both Jefferson Davis and Joseph Johnston.

Is the life of every Confederate general and officeholder worthy of a book-length biography? Surely not. Has Gustavus Woodson Smith been overlooked by previous writers? Perhaps so. Indeed, the most comprehensive single-volume survey of the war, James McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom*, does not even include Smith in its index. Hudson deserves credit for writing a generally brutally honest portrait of a man who, given the dearth of historical sources, may never be fully understood.

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