

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alan T. Nolan. *Rally Once Again!: Selected Civil War Writings of Alan T. Nolan.* Madison, Wis.: Madison House, 2000. xii + 308 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-945612-71-1.

Reviewed by Richard B. Lewis (Pamplin Historical Park, Petersburg, Virginia)

Published on H-CivWar (January, 2001)

Mention the name Alan Nolan in a crowd of Civil War buffs, and you are likely to hear both praise and damnation. Since the publication of his *Lee Considered: Gen. Robert E. Lee and Civil War History* (1991), Nolan is thought of by many as a trailblazing revisionist prophet, while others can think of him in no terms other than as the anti-Christ of Civil War historians.

So just who is this man who both provokes and provokes thought? A fine glimpse of Alan T. Nolan is found within the 320 pages of *Rally, Once Again!: Selected Civil War Writings of Alan T. Nolan*. The book is a compilation of essays, articles, reviews, and excerpts from larger works covering forty years of scholarship.

Among the selections are articles written for historical periodicals (among them *Civil War Times*, *Gettysburg Magazine*, and the defunct *Columbiad*) and legal publications (*Harvard Law School Bulletin*), book reviews from a variety of sources, introductions to other books, essays from other compilations, and excerpts from his earlier books.

All of the selections in this book are admirable, not only for scholarly thought, but also for elegance of presentation. Nolan is one of those rare people who not only are fine historians, but also talented writers. His presentation is direct. You know what Nolan is trying to tell you.

>From these pages emerges a man who must be considered (there's that word) one of today's outstanding Civil War historians, whether or not one agrees with his conclusions. Alan Nolan has contributed to the great body of Civil War history not only through his own work but also by the influence he has had on other historians.

Even when he is wrong, Nolan is scholarly – which is more than can be said for some other “revisionists.”

So, who then is Alan Nolan? Perhaps it can be said that he is the H. L. Mencken of Civil War historians: a brilliant journalist and a man with serious anti-South passions.

To be fair, Nolan is probably not anti-South, at least not to the degree of Mencken, but he is certainly anti-Confederate. Let the author himself lay out his feelings, which he does in the book's preface. After labeling the “contentions of the Southern myth of the Lost Cause” as “offensive,” he states, “I find almost nothing in the Confederate culture or tradition to admire or celebrate.”

There you have it, in classic Nolan fashion, clear and to the point. His statement should not be a revelation to anyone familiar with his catalog. As this book demonstrates, Nolan is almost consistently hostile to anything Confederate (as well as to historians who dare portray Confederates favorably) and adulatory of anything Federal.

Chief among Nolan's targets is, of course, Robert E. Lee. Nolan was right to ask us to “consider” the general and man. Much of the body of work on Lee tends to deify him and to raise him to the status of infallible saint. Much of *Rally, Once Again!* is devoted to Nolan's writings on Lee. In most of them, Nolan calls into question Lee's military judgement as well as personal character. Some of his conclusions seem reasonable, but others are preposterous. It seems that Nolan views Lee as the embodiment of the “Lost Cause” Nolan so despises and, because of this bent, seeks literary assassination of the “Hero of the South.” Perhaps this is not true, but the tone

and vigor of Nolan's prosecution of Lee certainly suggest an author "out to get" his quarry.

Part of the problem with Nolan's case against Lee is in the selectivity of evidence he presents, introducing only those things that support his argument and ignoring or discounting facts which do not.

In "Considering *Lee Considered*," Nolan asserts that Lee hated the North, citing Lee's own statements referring to the Federals as "vandals" who were filled with "malice and revenge." What indeed was Lee to think of the behavior of Federal troops under Pope, Hunter, and Sheridan? Were the destroyers of the private homes and property and harassers of defenseless noncombatants noble warriors?

Not included in Nolan's argument is this quotation attributed to Lee: "I have fought against the people of the North because I believe they were seeking to wrest from the South its dearest rights. But I have never seen the day when I did not pray for them." That statement has its own incriminations, but clearly this is not the language of a man filled with hatred.

Nolan also states that Lee was not a postwar conciliator. Among his citations is a statement Lee made to William Preston Johnston in which he referred to the "vindictiveness and malignity of the Yankees." Again, was Lee supposed to embrace and applaud the often harsh and often corrupt practices of the occupying Federal garrisons in the South during Reconstruction?

Typical of the great body of evidence to the contrary not presented by Nolan was Lee's reply to a venom-filled letter from a Confederate widow: "Madam, do not train up your children in hostility to the government of the United States. Remember we are all one country now. Put aside all sectional feeling and bring them up to be Americans."

Nolan takes to task the historians who, to him, have sought to raise Lee to sainthood. To a considerable degree, Nolan is right, though he is again selective in his presentation. He singles out Charles Bracelen Flood for referring to Lee as a "Confederate Santa Claus" in Flood's book *Lee: The Last Years*. Flood used that term when describing Lee at Christmas on horseback with a sack of gifts for young neighboring children. What other term would have been more appropriate for Flood to use?

Nolan dismisses the writings of Col. Charles Marshall, Lee's aide and one of his closest associates during the war. Nolan also wholly embraces the views of Maj.

Gen. J. F. C. Fuller, the British military historian who was highly critical of Lee. We are asked, therefore, to believe that Fuller, a man writing a continent and several decades away, more fully understood Lee and his campaigns than did a man who often shared Lee's very tent.

In "General Lee - A Different View" (essay from *The Color Bearers*, American Blue and Gray Association, 1995), Nolan argues that, while sound and even brilliant as a tactician and operational strategist, Lee's great failure as a commander was in "grand strategy." In this, Lee "did not understand the war." Because Lee embraced an aggressive strategy of conducting offensive operations against the Union armies, he decimated his forces in a series of costly battles, incurring losses he could not replace. In doing so, Lee rendered his army vulnerable to the immobility imposed on it by Appomattox.

Nolan contends that Lee should have pursued a defensive war, husbanding his limited resources, and keeping at bay a superior force. In the course of this strategy, Lee might have inflicted sufficient casualties on his opponent and prolonged the conflict to a point at which northern popular support for the war effort diminished.

The author's argument is well conceived, admirably presented, and not at all without merit, though it ignores the question of whether Lincoln and his generals would have played along. Nolan uses the Battle of Fredericksburg as an example of how Lee should have fought his battles. Lee himself might have wished for that opportunity every time out. Unfortunately for Lee, he faced Ambrose Burnside only once.

Whether we think Alan Nolan right or wrong on Lee, these writings illustrate his greatest virtues as a historian: he presents his subject clearly. His thoughts are organized and well delivered. His writing is succinct, clear, and to the point. It is devoid of superfluous prose. Alan Nolan is not out to impress anyone with his ability to craft word pictures. He is simply a good writer. Actually, he is a great writer.

That talent manifests itself throughout the selections of *Rally, Once Again!* In "R. E. Lee and July 1 at Gettysburg" (from the Gary Gallagher-edited *First Day at Gettysburg*, UNC Press, 1995), Nolan's writing conveys his understanding of who his audience is. The reader of that book is probably a dedicated student of military history, one already quite familiar with the history of the battle. Nolan therefore wastes no space in describing the entire fight but rather sticks closely to his own theme.

Nolan first came to prominence in 1961 with his classic unit study *The Iron Brigade*, chosen by *Civil War Times Illustrated* as one of the one hundred best Civil War books. An entire section of *Rally, Once Again!* is devoted to his writings on the fabled fighting unit. Through these, Nolan creates stirring battle narrative and also brings the reader into personal contact with some of the brigade leaders. For casual history buffs as well as serious students, can this be considered anything other than great reading? It is compelling stuff, brought to life by a man who cares about both his subject and readers.

That Alan Nolan is comfortable in a variety of styles and subjects is clear. From technical battle analysis to character study to legal cases, Nolan writes with clarity, exhibiting an unyielding respect to his reader. "Confederate Leadership at Fredericksburg" is as accessible to the lay reader as is "Ex Parte Milligan: A Curb of Executive Military Power." For this reviewer, some of the best works in the book are Nolan's assessment of Lincoln as a lawyer (and how that training manifested itself during his presidency) as well as the author's analysis of some key legal cases. If Nolan can make a legal case both palatable and interesting for the masses, his is a unique talent.

Alan Nolan is also a veteran reviewer of books. He states humorously (and correctly) that one of the benefits of being a reviewer is that "you get a free book." Because of his own apparent breadth of interests, Nolan is

an accomplished reviewer. He does again exhibit his antipathy toward historians who favorably portray Confederates (the highly respected James I. "Bud" Robertson is condemned, for example) and admiration for those who chronicle Union military units and leaders.

Rally, Once Again! reinforces Alan Nolan's status as a historian of importance and influence. This reviewer obviously disagrees with his contentions about Lee, but we *need* a historian like Alan Nolan who causes us to reevaluate and to question. Often we are led to a greater understanding of a person or issue – or at least to understand better those who adopt a differing opinion from ours. That is the importance of Alan Nolan among contemporary historians.

Nolan mentions in the book a letter written to the editor of the *Civil War News* urging the public not to buy *Lee Considered*, or to burn it if they had already bought it. You should buy *Lee Considered*, and you should buy *Rally, Once Again!* Don't burn them. Read them. Learn from them. If you agree or disagree with Alan Nolan, ask yourself why, and then embark on your own quest to *consider* Civil War history.

Copyright (c) 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

Citation: Richard B. Lewis. Review of Nolan, Alan T., *Rally Once Again!: Selected Civil War Writings of Alan T. Nolan*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. January, 2001.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4831>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.