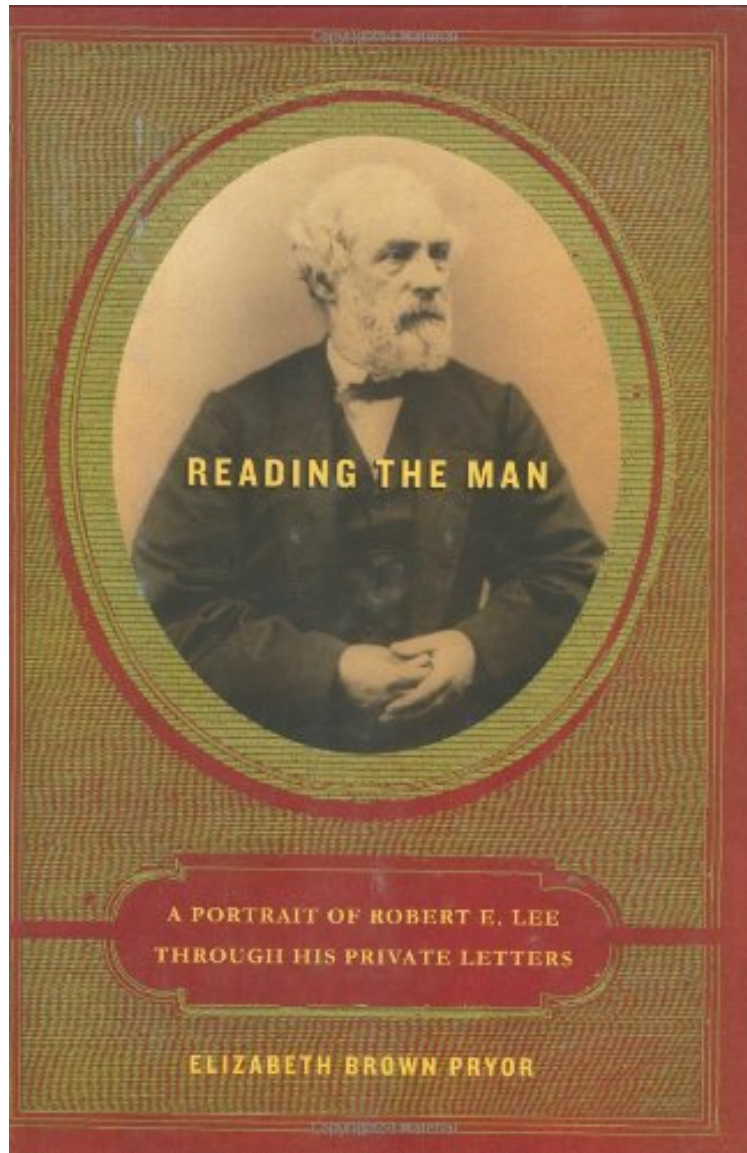


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Reading the Man: A Portrait of Robert E. Lee Through His Private Letters

Elizabeth Brown Pryor

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Elizabeth Brown Pryor : Reading the Man: A Portrait of Robert E. Lee Through His Private Letters before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Reading the Man: A Portrait of Robert E. Lee Through His Private Letters:

0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Reading the Man Robert E LeeBy Gary L. StatonInteresting book

and a somewhat different take on this famous General. This book takes the reader to a different place in the life of Robert AE Lee and rather than a authors perception it depends more on Lee's own correspondence. This book has a propensity to be a little dry in some places but overall a good addition to anyones civil War Library. A different way to study history instead of a story.. I have recommended this to friends.0 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

RJBy RJThe seller was fairly prompt in shipping the book, the condition was good and the price asked was reasonable. The book was not what I expected with reference to its contents. The seller did not misrepresent the book in any way. The book just did not contain the information I was seeking.23 of 26 people found the following review helpful.

Interesting Until the Civil WarBy JPAAlmost as soon as I started reading "Reading the Man" I pictured the glowing review I would write. It would begin with "It's a Biography!!!" and despite the odd title of "Reading the Man," I would point out that it is, primarily, biography. Different from other biographies, however, Pryor allows, to some extent, Lee to speak for himself, beginning each chapter with a few pages of pertinent letters from Lee. Pryor would then use those letters as a jumping off spot for a biography that felt very much more like a series of essays, Pryor not at all hiding her own voice or opinions, as she tried to reveal "the Man" in question, Robert E. Lee. Indeed, in the opening chapters I think Pryor achieves something very unique and worthwhile, letting Lee speak for himself, placing Lee in context, and using her own noggin' to suggest new ways of understanding Lee that focus very much on his nature as regular person, which he very much was until the Civil War. Pryor's opening chapters, consisting of a few hundred pages, are, I think, invaluable on that level. But then there's a change which seems hard to comprehend. Grant said something like that he honored the southerners very much for the way they valiantly fought for their cause, although he thought their cause one of the worst imaginable. That seems dead on to me, and Pryor definitely agrees with the second half of that sentiment, leaving no doubt that the Confederacy was in the wrong. Fair enough. Yet my problem is that Pryor disagrees with the first half of Grant's statement. In her telling, every Lee victory was the result of his great lieutenants. Every Lee failure was the result of no one but Lee alone. Lee's generalship is criticized at every turn, which is so at odds from every other reliable account I've read that this telling seems deeply flawed. "Context" is often an odd question in the Civil War, and people often say "judge Lee by his times," and many people were pro slavery so Lee can't be faulted for that. Wrong. A great many people were anti-slavery as well, and had been for decades if not centuries, so let's not let Lee off on that score. Pryor comes down harshly on the question of Lee and slavery, and I've read other sources that give him a pass, buy my gut tells me that Pryor is probably closer to the truth on that front than those who claim Lee never liked slavery and would have ended the peculiar institution if he could have (dissenters are right to note that the slaves Lee's wife inherited belonged to her, but as the executor of that will, if Lee was anti-slavery he could have done more to free them sooner). Yet Pryor misses "context" on other fronts. She blames Lee for the carnage of the Civil War, without appreciating the fact that plenty of other generals, on both sides and in all theaters, faced similar body counts. She simultaneously blames Lee for prolonging a war that couldn't be won and pursuing tactics that didn't lead to victory for the South. Indeed, she never misses an opportunity to point out mistakes Lee made (or to quote from dubious sources criticizing Lee), yet never seems to find time to point out that for a couple of years Lee was tremendously successful, defeated a string of Union generals who were thought to be the best shot for Union victory until Lee defeated them, and despite the fact that Lee was almost always fighting with fewer men with lesser supplies and equipment, very nearly brought about the Southern success that would have been inevitable had McClellan been elected president in 1864. Indeed, it often seems that the only time Pryor mentions the disparity in men and material is when she chides Lee for complaining about it. At one point Lee's past success with less is used against him, when Pryor shrugs off the suggestion that it could have been one cause for the loss at Gettysburg because Lee had won against longer odds before. She even manages to blame Lee for his white hair and beard that gave him a "paternalistic" image (Pryor notes derisively Lee's soldier's parental nickname for him, without mentioning that soldiers had similar nicknames for Sherman and other generals). Pryor fetishizes Lee's decision to fight for the south (as others have before), without considering how many other thousands of citizens had also taken similar oaths and similarly broke them (nor does she consider how many Northerners were also fighting for their own states). Pryor blames Lee for staying out of politics, when a non-political general is considered a good thing, especially in light of all the bad political generals of the Civil War (but then after the war he is blamed for being too political). Pryor blames Lee for not promoting his own aids, when, had he done so, I'm sure she'd be griping about favoritism. The "context" problem with this book is not a look back at moral questions that now seem clear to us---the "context" problem is that Pryor looks at Lee in a vacuum and sees only the faults. Are we really to blame Lee for the fact that the Confederate army had fewer supplies than the much better supplied Union army, but that he still managed to defeat that other army repeatedly? I'm not saying that Lee always made the right choice (see, e.g., Pickett's Charge), but failing to recognize the struggles all parties were up against seems wrongheaded. In short, the "context" Pryor is missing is not the tired "judge him by his times", but the more problematic context of looking at what other individuals in Lee's place on both sides of the war were doing. The context missing is an appreciation for what was going on in many different fronts during the war (e.g., Lee is repeatedly criticized for his 2 forays into the north that ended in defeat, but Pryor doesn't appreciate why Lee went north or what he was trying to accomplish, or the political realities that almost led to Lincoln's loss in 1864.) Pryor decides not to examine that larger context, and instead decides to just blame Lee for

everything that went wrong and to give credit for everything that went right to others. Indeed, it seems that once Pryor decides Lee was wrong about slavery, Lee must have been wrong about everything else. And while the writing style is well done and keeps the reader going, Pryor is also given to statements like the following, which frankly make no sense: "A fratricidal conflict is the most horrific event that can befall a nation. Every death is as morally grotesque as it is shocking to the senses. Bloodshed, however, is not the greatest calamity of civil war. What lingers is the gaping fissure in confidence; the collapse of old understandings and easy interaction." Really? I'm not saying a civil war is a good thing, but is it really the worst thing that can happen to a nation? And in a war where 700,000 people died, the worst thing that happened is the loss of confidence? And was "every death . . . morally grotesque"? I think there were probably at least some who gave their lives heroically for the noble cause of ending slavery, and there were also probably some very bad people whose deaths were not "morally grotesque." Pryor gives the reader her own voice in passages like the above and sometimes she provides a helpful insight, but sometimes it is ham-handed gobbledeygook. The beginning of this book is excellent, but then it goes off the rails.

For the 200th anniversary of Robert E. Lee's birth, a new portrait drawing on previously unpublished correspondence Robert E. Lee's war correspondence is well known, and here and there personal letters have found their way into print, but the great majority of his most intimate messages have never been made public. These letters reveal a far more complex and contradictory man than the one who comes most readily to the imagination, for it is with his family and his friends that Lee is at his most candid, most engaging, and most vulnerable. Over the past several years historian Elizabeth Brown Pryor has uncovered a rich trove of unpublished Lee materials that had been held in both private and public collections. Her new book, a unique blend of analysis, narrative, and historiography, presents dozens of these letters in their entirety, most by Lee but a few by family members. Each letter becomes a departure point for an essay that shows what the letter uniquely reveals about Lee's time or character. The material covers all aspects of Lee's life—his early years, West Point, his work as an engineer, his relationships with his children and his slaves, his decision to join the South, his thoughts on military strategy, and his disappointments after defeat in the Civil War. The result is perhaps the most intimate picture to date of Lee, one that deftly analyzes the meaning of his actions within the context of his personality, his relationships, and the social tenor of his times.

From Booklist Robert E. Lee remains one of the most revered figures in U.S. history. For southerners he remains the personification of the Lost Cause, a military genius and courtly aristocrat whose nobility of spirit was worthy of the intense devotion he elicited from his men and admirers. Even Americans who despised the cause for which Lee fought express admiration for his military acumen, compassion, and kindness. But both in his personal and public life, Lee was more complicated than the iconic image suggests. Historian Pryor uses a compilation of Lee's private correspondence, adding her own commentaries, to present a more balanced but scrupulously fair portrait. There are surprises here. As commandant at West Point, Lee was far from beloved by cadets, who resented his authoritarian ways. Although Lee had his doubts about the utility of slavery as an institution, his views on race relations were hardly enlightened. Still, his letters and Pryor's analysis reinforce our appreciation of Lee's best qualities, including his personal warmth, devotion to friends and family, and sense of fairness. Jay Freeman Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved "Pryor has taken an icon and given us the soul of a complex man and his turbulent age." --The Wall Street Journal "Elizabeth Pryor's magnificent Reading the Man forever buries the tired assumption that the real Robert E. Lee can never be found. Her exhaustive research and beautiful prose recover the many layers of Lee's being."--Peter Carmichael, Virginia Magazine of History and Biography "An orthodox, critical, and engaging biography. . . . [Pryor] impressively captures Lee's character and personality."--The Boston Globe "Pryor moves onto important historical and interpretive terrain with a far more discerning and critical eye than most of her scholarly or popular predecessors."--The New Republic About the Author Elizabeth Brown Pryor has combined careers as an award-winning historian and senior diplomat in the American Foreign Service, most recently as a senior adviser to the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe of the U.S. Congress. Her 1987 biography of Clara Barton is considered the authoritative work on the subject.