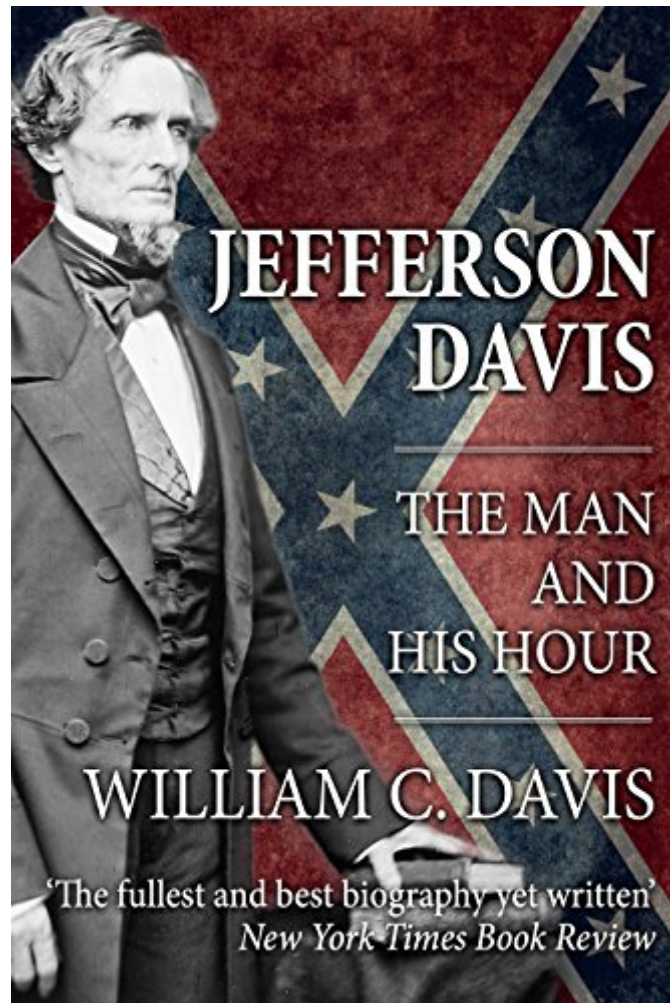




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Jefferson Davis: The Man And His Hour



Synopsis

“If the Confederacy falls, there should be written on its tombstone, ‘Died of a theory.’” As divisive a figure then as he is now, history remembers Jefferson Davis as the ill-fated President of the Confederate States of America. Like the Roman God Janus, he had two faces: considered cold, aloof, petty, obstinate and vindictive, he was also witty, intelligent, affectionate, impervious to fear and loyal to a fault. Raised in Mississippi, at his brother’s behest he entered West Point and began the first of two Army careers; in the 1850s he would be named Secretary of War by Franklin Pierce. A staunch defender of slavery, Davis was an unusual owner: he encouraged them to learn new skills, administer their own justice and provided them with a comfortable living. Yet Davis did not fully comprehend human nature. To him his logic was irrefutable, and he was never able to see how his remarks, while not necessarily ill-meant, might cause offence. However, his life was plagued by sickness and grief. In addition to his own health issues his first wife died tragically young, as did four of his six children with his second. A complex portrait of a complex man, William C. Davis’s endeavour methodically explores the life of the leader of the Lost Cause and how the man was made. Praise for Jefferson Davis: The Man and His Hour “The fullest and best biography yet written, a work that will remain a standard authoritative account of the life of the Confederate President.” • David Herbert Donald, New York Times Book Review “A dispassionate, well-researched, and skillful biography of a complex and controversial figure.” • Kirkus Reviews William C. Davis is an American historian and former Professor of History who specialises in the Civil War and Southern States. A prolific writer, he has written or edited more than forty works on the subject and is four-time winner of the Jefferson Davis Award.

Book Information

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Civil War

Customer Reviews

This was an interesting book, and not one I would normally have read. I was kindly offered a digital copy for free from Endeavour Press to review and given my interest in the (American) Civil War, I decided I would try out the book on the President of the Confederacy. In that vein, the digital edition is quite good. I found few typos, and the linking within the ebook works quite well. The ebook is well-done. The author, William Davis, does an admirable job of presenting the person Jefferson Davis, from boyhood to old age. I admit that I came to the book with a negative impression of Davis (I agree with US Grant that the Confederacy was "one of the worst for which a people ever fought, and one for which there was the least excuse"), but the book does a good job of evaluating Davis objectively. I cannot say that I have a positive impression of Davis now, but I do have a more nuanced impression. We learn of Davis's childhood, his father, his older brother that acted more as a father, and Davis's traits that defined him for better or worse: obstinacy/steadfastness, loyalty, and an unshakeable belief that his opinion is right. We learn of his escapades at West Point, narrowly avoiding expulsion, and his short career in the military. We get to Davis's political life (and his tour in the Mexican-American War), as he eventually became a Senator, and we learn of his views in the ante-bellum era. I was surprised to learn that Davis's slaves were actually treated relatively generously (but they were still slaves, so it is not like it was great...). The slaves on the plantation were not allowed to be whipped, and Davis by all accounts treated them rather well. He certainly shared the prejudices of his era about slaves capacities once free. The author notes that Davis treated children and women quite well, in addition. It was only those who questioned Davis that endured his obstinacy. We then go on through Davis's Secretary of War stint, and get to the reason anyone writes about Davis, his presidency during the Civil War (the author says "The fact is that there is one reason, and only one, for writing or reading a biography of Jefferson Davis, and that is

his quadrennium as leader of the Lost Cause"). Here the author understandably devotes a large portion of the book, and I think he does a good job of keeping the focus on Davis and his actions. I have read many Civil War books, and they often get bogged down in the details of battles; the author does a great job of avoiding this and simply explaining the overall situation, including how Davis's actions fit into the strategic picture. We then learn of Davis's final years, which were turbulent, but ended in peace. The author mostly avoids questions that haunt most Civil War related books [ranging from answered questions, like "why did the war happen?", to "could the South have won?"]. He acknowledges that slavery drove the Confederacy into being, but does not dwell on it. Similarly, he does not engage in what-ifs for battles that could have gone differently and possibly changed the outcome of the war. I do not mean this as a criticism, as I think the author acknowledges the questions, but he only tackles them as they pertain to Jefferson Davis (since it is a Jefferson Davis biography, after all). That said, the final chapter takes the Union's victory as a foregone conclusion. I am not one who buys the "Lost Cause". The author says "Any final verdict on Davis as war president must be predicated on the assumption that the Confederacy could not have won the war under the conditions it faced" or "had their roles been reversed, and Davis led the North and Lincoln the South, the Union would still have won". My own opinion is that it was certainly possible for the South to win, even if the chances were not great. The South could move troops internally around in a defensive war and needed to demoralize the North. This is difficult, but it's hard to believe it was impossible. Overall, we are left with a portrait of a man who was not suited to the office. He had good friends and bad friends, and a good deal of the book also talks about his remarkable wife Varina. In the end, we are left with the fact that Jefferson Davis had many flaws, and he dealt with very difficult situations, but he fought a great effort for a cause that he believed in. But it was for an awful cause. If you have strong interest in the Civil War era, I would definitely recommend the book as a viewpoint into the South and its leadership. The writing is quite good, although the themes of Davis's weaknesses can be hammered a bit too much. You will not be learning the details of battle, nor an in-depth analysis of the causes and driving forces of the war, but you will get insight into the era in which Davis lived and how the South was run. Given the length, it probably is not worth reading if you do not have a strong interest in the Civil War era or a particular reason to read about Jefferson Davis.

I love history, and most of all Civil War history, but when I saw that this book was 900+ pages I nearly passed it by. Jefferson Davis was an interesting person who lived during a very interesting period, but he was and is controversial, and I had no interest in wading through a lengthy homage or

excoriation. But the book was free with my Prime membership, so I figured I'd at least take a look, and I'm very, very glad I did. The author W. Davis (a descendent perhaps?) states in his introduction that he will attempt to present a comprehensive, balanced look at a flawed human, neither glossing over his myriad failures nor ignoring his many achievements, uncomfortable as it can be in the modern age to acknowledge positive features of a slave owner. And in Jefferson Davis's case, not only a slave owner but a veritable embodiment of 19th century Southern slavery. Davis--the author--succeeds in his efforts at balance, while not shying away from offering his opinions, assessments, and judgements when warranted. Especially enlightening for me was the background information about Davis's--the Confederate president's--life. Although I considered myself fairly well read on the subject, the volume and scope of this work was such that there was quite a lot of information new to me, especially pertaining to the years before 1848. Speaking of volume and scope, the biggest surprise about this book was what a page-turner it was. Historical and biographical writing often suffers from the "spoiler effect", that is, one begins the narrative already knowing the high points and the ending, and consequently the story lacks suspense; readers find themselves skipping ahead either to parts of the story they don't know or to retellings of their favorite bits. I never felt that boredom with this book, probably because the author does a wonderful job of analyzing major events in Davis's life and assessing them in the context earlier formative experiences, and Davis's fundamental personality traits. It's a psychological angle I'd never considered for Jefferson Davis, and it made a well-covered subject interesting anew. If you have no interest in Civil War history you probably won't stay interested through the length of this book (and a million curses upon the history teachers who convinced you "history is boring", despite the a world of evidence to the contrary), but as an enthusiastic amateur historian, this book, to my happy surprise, was an edifying and highly enjoyable read.

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