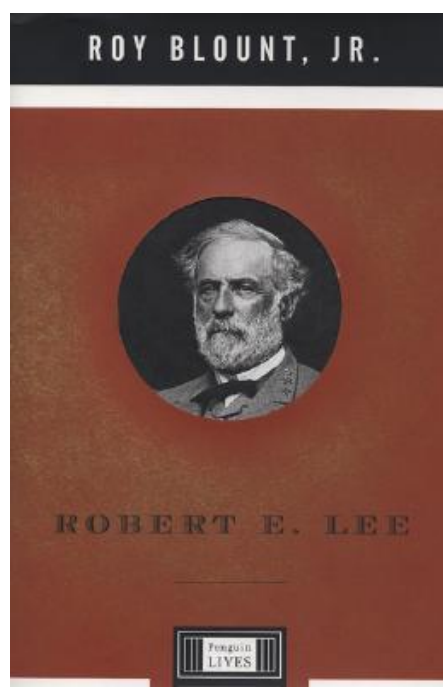




Robert E. Lee

Roy Blount Jr.

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Robert E. Lee Roy Blount Jr.

Iconic Virginian, brilliant general, and complex human being—it is this last facet of Robert E. Lee that is rarely seen. But now Roy Blount, Jr. combines acute character insight with lively storytelling and a full-hearted Southern directness to craft this unique, personal portrait.

Fascinated by what made Lee into such a great, though reluctant, leader, Blount delves into his family history and his personality. He illustrates how, descended from two illustrious families, Lee embodied the best of all their traits and became Lincoln's first choice to lead the Union troops in 1861. But Lee's Virginia roots drew him, instead, to the Confederate command. Blount vividly conveys not only his ambition and courage but also his humility and humor, and his sorrowful sense of responsibility for his outnumbered, outgunned, half-starved army. **Robert E. Lee**, the first succinct biography of this American legend, will appeal to history and military buffs, proud Southerners, and every reader curious to discover the man behind the military leader.

Robert E. Lee Details

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From Reader Review Robert E. Lee for online ebook

Tony says

Some amateur critics complain that this isn't a comprehensive treatment, but ultimately that's a complaint rooted in laziness. If you want a fuller coverage of Lee's life's events, most of the relevant materials are readily available. Blount focuses on the hardest and most speculative component, which is what Lee thought and felt. Lee wrote little of consequence or substance, published no postbellum memoir. He took over a quiet college that had been sacked by Union soldiers and spent his last days rebuilding in a quiet corner of his beloved Virginia.

We must, therefore, speculate to some degree about his character and motives. This effort has been hampered by partisans for over a century--Confederacy sympathizers who want to canonize him, and (mostly) northern academics who seek to demonize him.

The service Blount renders then, is to bring compassion and empathy to his subject. Lee was a man deeply flawed in some respects, and emotionally distant, but also committed to a code of honor that we can scarcely recall now, and which we therefore struggle to understand. Blount tries to give us some of that understanding. And certainly some of his speculations--especially the Freud-besotted ones--are probably errant, but he has the intellectual honesty to acknowledge up front that he may well be wrong.

What we have, then, is an easily read, thoughtful, and--in light of a modern insistence that the Civil War was simply about slavery--courageous point of view. Professional historians, many of whom do more to muddy the waters with thinner speculations rooted in denser thickets of verbiage, should take note.

Jordan says

Roy Blount Jr.'s short biography of Robert E. Lee is an idiosyncratic book. It's broadly organized into two parts: a biography, running a brisk 160 pages, and a 45-page section of appendices.

The biographical half of the book is good. Blount's account is readable and nicely summarizes Lee's life, beginning with the legacy of his wastrel father, a one-time comrade-in-arms and friend of George Washington. Blount depicts Lee's father casting a shadow over the entirety of Lee's life, a point explored by other biographers but made central to the story here. Blount even ascribes to Lee an oedipal complex at least twice--about which more shortly.

Blount moves quickly through the early stages of Lee's life: the difficult circumstances of his youth, his time as a cadet and young Army officer, the Mexican War and his tenure as commandant of West Point. The longest section, as in most Lee bios, is that on the Civil War. This section is very good given its brevity. Given the constraints of space and a general readership, Blount has to pick and choose and--mostly--chooses well. He avoids bogging down in the nitty gritty of the Civil War campaigns and includes a lot of telling personal details throughout--Lee's heart problems, his pet chicken, his self-abnegation, his platonic fondness for ladies, his affection for his children and his concern for their discipline and morality--drawing a decent sketch of Lee as a man.

The book is writerly; Blount's interests as a writer and raconteur peek through in a lot of odd ways, including numerous references to Faulkner and Robert Penn Warren and a meditation on Lee's spelling. Blount may be no historian but the book is, again, readable, often witty, and only occasionally marred by errors of fact. As

just one example, Blount blunders in describing the Battle of Antietam as “the war’s bloodiest” battle (105). That dubious distinction belongs to the three-day Battle of Gettysburg; Antietam was the bloodiest single day of the war. An understandable slip, but a slip nonetheless.

The book has two serious flaws. The first is Blount’s endless psychoanalysis of Lee. And I use “psychoanalysis” deliberately; Blount drags a lot of outdated Freudian theory into the scene to try to make sense of the unknowable Lee. Blount winks at it several times, suggesting to the reader that he finds what he’s writing faintly ridiculous, but he writes it anyway. The most ludicrous moment comes in Blount’s rumination on how Lee came to lose at Gettysburg:

[Union General] Meade’s headquarters was a thousand yards or so from the Baltimore Pike. Lee’s was about the same distance from the Mummasburg Road. When Light-Horse Harry Lee was just about Lee’s age at Gettysburg, he came to grief in Baltimore. It was a man known to history only as ‘a giant of a man named Mumma’ who tried to cut off his nose.

Maybe something in Harry’s son decided, *this is the place*. To win his war or lose it, to resolve his oedipal conflict or not (132).

Fortunately this kind of thing is sparse within the body of the biography itself, but its presence is silly and pulls the narrative up short whenever it intrudes.

Tied to the psychoanalytic strains of the biography are the strangest parts of the book, the three appendices that make up the last forty pages. These three sections are independent essays on different facets of Lee’s personality and are of wildly varying quality. The second, “Lee’s Humor,” is full of personal tidbits that could have been sprinkled into the narrative--or excised entirely without damaging the book. It shows a more human side of Lee, a man capable of joking and acting silly with his family. The third, “Lee’s Attitude Toward Slavery,” is essential to understanding the man and it makes no sense to have affixed it as an appendix. This is material that should have been incorporated into the main text.

But the most idiosyncratic, ridiculous passages of the entire book are in the first appendix, “Speculation.” Much of it is taken up with idle conjecture. Lee had small feet, Blount notes. He liked it when his children tickled them. He requested fresh socks a lot in letters. Could it be, Blount suggests, and one involuntarily imagines a wry grin, that Lee had a foot fetish? Could it have been an oedipal thing too? “Robert was presumably pleased to ease his mother’s aches by massage” (167). Blount brings in the psychology of “gifted children,” titters over the contents of a Richmond prostitute’s diary, compares Lee to other “mother’s boys” like Elvis, rates actors who have depicted Lee on film, and ponders how other men’s admiration of Lee’s looks affected him as “a young heterosexual man” (181). It’s a freeform dump of non-information that offers next to nothing beyond prurient leering at a dead icon.

That’s my deepest reservation--the psychologizing and the rambling appendices detract from this otherwise fun and engaging short biography. When Blount rises to the level of his subject, the book is excellent. Some of the discursive passages provide enlightening new angles from which to view Lee. But the book’s flaws don’t recommend it.

Recommended only to those already familiar with Lee and seeking a little distraction.

Daniel says

Having heard Roy Blount on NPR discussing his new book on onomatopoeia in prose, this little volume called to me from my shelf. It is an entertaining and fair appraisal by an intelligent Southerner about one of the region's major personalities. I had always heard that Lee freed his slaves before the war, but this book has taught me Lee's gradualist-abolitionist tendencies put far too much emphasis on the gradual. It is hard not to think of the carnage that would have been avoided if this one man had rated liberty of all people above defense of his state. All in all, this is pleasantly written human portrait of a large figure from a morally confused time.

Bahramo says

An incredible book... He was against keeping the confederate flag... Or any kind of memorial on the civil war. Very loyal to his home... But with very strong anti-war beliefs, which is odd given how many battles he was responsible for. The author paints a picture of a man who was not comfortable with slavery... And for all the people who still want the confederate flag represented, here's an excerpt:

"He refused to be buried in his Confederate uniform. His family refused to allow anyone dressed in the confederate uniform to attend his funeral."

"Why? Because Robert E. Lee said he considered this emblem to be a symbol of treason."

I just love history. A book a that belongs in everyone's library.

GarnerGoingsOn Library says

This book will not remain on any of my shelves, nor will I even deign to obtain credit for it at my local used bookstore. I'm taking it to my recycling bin post haste. This is not a serious work of biographical history, rather, a prime example of snarky-pseudo-psycho-babble-blather. New York Times finds it witty, lively and wholly fascinating. It figures. I found it gossipy, waspish and compulsively voyeuristic in full blown Freudian fashion, and therefore useless; except as a window to the soul of the author, in whom I was never interested, even less so now.

Bill says

This is, at best, a book to accompany something...anything...of more weight about Robert E. Lee. It is an odd little volume that covers Lee's life in something of a stream-of-consciousness form, touching on many subjects but saying little about them.

It's not horrible, and it's an easy read with some information that you'll not likely find anywhere else but it's not the place to start.

Mbcrowe says

This biography has a fundamental strength lacked by so many biographies; it focuses on an interesting human being. The book is not a criticism or commentary on Lee's military strategy but an overview of the man and his life. Numerous insights into the man's entertaining antics are given, and a feel for what it must have been like to know him is gained in the pages. The biography dives deeper than his actions as a civil war general, his family life, worldview, personal habits, military actions before the war and various other aspects of his life receive full converge. Lee is fundamentally portrayed as a capable and dedicated commander, all around solemn figure with a deep sense of honor and dedicated family man. Whereas Lee never published anything but the introduction to a short memoir on his deadbeat father Blount dives masterfully into Lee's personal letters, largely to his family. There we can see Lee as more than the solemn general yet as a human being. These letters teach us of things from his dedication too his children to his open flirting with women other than his wife. Lee as a general is also well covered, Blount tells the tale of Lee's development as a soldier from the perfect cadet at west point to his surrender in the civil war. Gettysburg is portrayed as the climax of Lee's life and dramatically covered as if the climax of a novel. Blount moves speculation on Lee and accounts of his humor and attitudes towards slavery to appendixes in the back of the book. This allows him to have the main narrative move fast. The book is only a little over 200 pages and provides a fell for the man without getting bogged down. A feel for the times is also given and Lee's life provides an interesting perspective on the war as a whole.

Infromsea says

I think the author took great pains to be as negative as he could about Lee.

This is a very cursory look at the subject, more time was spent on the size of Lee's feet and other subjects than the war or its battles.

I'm going in search of a more thorough book on the subject.

Nicholas says

Anyone who expects the usual Roy Blount Jr. humor is going to be disappointed by this short, straightforward, and high-quality biography. The book is good, just not his usual fare. Blount does an excellent job explaining the fascination Americans so long had with a "good" man fighting for a bad cause.

Julene says

Mixed feelings on this. Clearly not intended to be an all-inclusive history of the man, I appreciated the short form but so much of Blount's offering is but speculation.

We get it: emotionally overbearing mother, the shadow of his fuck-up father, and the desire to protect his home of Virginia led him to his position with the Confederacy. Presenting Lee as a 'decent' slave owner and conflicted defender of the succession doesn't change who he fought for; the why is interesting, sure, but anyone who didn't think there was a fallible human being behind the legend ultimately created in his image

has forgotten how much America prefers a good story to the full one.

L. says

Those who know me know I'm usually pretty hard on short biographies, since they generally require little from the author other than a brief synthesis of longer books by earlier, more thorough researchers. The only way a short bio can really stand out is if it is notable for some other feature of its writing.

As a biography of Robert E. Lee, this book is probably bound to disappoint, particularly if the reader is hoping to come off with any major insights about Lee's generalship in the Civil War (you know, the man's main claim to fame, outside of his generally successful postbellum stint as a college president). As a lengthy essay with an unusual perspective, though, it's a very interesting read. Even the list of cited sources and references contains a lot that's off the beaten path--a lot more literature, for one! Anyone who has grown up with Wait Wait, Don't Tell Me is probably familiar with Roy Blount Jr.'s oddball contributions to the NPR quiz show; the man has never met a tangent he didn't want to pursue. His natural proclivities are out in full force here, but the result is a rather different Lee portrait than one is likely to get from the more irritating partisans of either the North or the South. Sometimes the tangents can get too, well, tangential, but overall, the focus on Lee the man and Lee the myth, rather than Lee the hero/villain, is a bit of a welcome change from the heavier biographical works. There are a million books about Gettysburg, but I can't think of any that stop to address any major military figure's sense of humor. (Blame Blount's way with words, but I laughed out loud, multiple times. How often can one say that about a Civil War book? Well, one that doesn't involve General McClellan, anyway...) I wouldn't advise it as a book to read to learn anything about the military or historical side of the Civil War, but for a brief peek behind the curtain into the foibles, flaws, fussiness, and finesse of one of the war's major players off of the battlefield, it's worth a look.

Shawn Thrasher says

I wish I could adequately describe or capture Roy Blount's style - subtle and droll but never glibly so. He takes his subject very seriously but also injects what I assume from listening to him on NPR's Wait Wait Don't Tell Me is his trademark gentle but pointed humor. Here's just one delightful example, talking about the ever complaining and mostly unpleasant sounding (for good reason though) Mary Lee and the Yankees taking over their house at Arlington. "Many of the Cold Harbor dead were buried in Mary Lee's front yard. That spring, George Meigs, an angry Georgian who had served under Lee before the war but had remained with the Union and become quartermaster general, had turned her old homeplace into a national cemetery. Those people." It's those little aside and humorous (or should I say Humorist) turns of phrase that makes this a delightful little book. Blount's asides and punctures of humor are carefully dropped here, there - and really everywhere - throughout the book, but they never get in the way.

Jacob Lines says

Why do so many Americans consider Robert E. Lee one of the "good" Confederates? It is a phenomenon that started right after the Civil War and continues today. Probably because he was not personally offensive. Personally, he was kind and genuinely religious and disliked slavery, etc. But his actions in the battlefield were responsible for prolonging the Civil War, advancing the cause of slavery, immiserating thousands, and causing untold destruction. (At the same time, his military successes ensured that the war would drag on, the

South would be ravaged and impoverished by the war, and slavery would end. Perhaps he was an instrument in God's hands.) This excellent short biography wrestles with those questions. It also delves into Lee's psychology – the burden of a father who disgraced the family honor in a culture that placed honor above all else, the overcompensation of being the perfect person (the man received NO demerits as a West Point cadet – he was literally the perfect student), his relationship with his mother and his wife, and lots of other minefields.

I'll be honest – one of the reasons I liked this book is because it was relatively short. I wanted to learn more about Lee, but I didn't need a blow-by-blow history of all his military exploits. This book gave a good level of detail about the battles and Lee's decisions, but it didn't bog down. If you are interested in the military history of the Civil War, you should look elsewhere. This is a good short introduction into Lee's life.

Jeff Crompton says

An excellent short biography of Lee. Blount doesn't portray the general as either a hero or villain, but as someone who felt that he had no choice but to take the path he did. Lee had a somewhat negative view of slavery (albeit in a paternalistic kind of way) and thought that secession was a mistake, but in the end, his ties were with Virginia rather than the United States.

Blount's writing is usually filled with amusing digressions, but there is little of that here - or, more correctly, he saves it all up until the end. After the end of the biography proper, there are three appendices: "Speculation" (on the psychology behind Lee's decisions), "Lee's Humor," and "Lee's Attitude Toward Slavery." Until those appendices, Blount pretty much leaves himself out of things; his writing is straightforward and informative.

I probably shouldn't even bother, but I can't help commenting on another review here, from June, 2011 - I don't understand it at all. There are three or so pages in the "Speculation" appendix about feet, and around 70 pages (more than a third of the book) dealing with Lee's conduct of the war. I think that one can be safely ignored.

Rock says

Blount's eye for telling details makes this book one of the best biographies I've ever read. He begins his life of Lee with an analysis of his subject's spelling tendencies and the implications on his personality and social standing, and if he doesn't reproduce every amusing anecdote about Lee, he includes enough to keep the reader giggling. My only complaint is about the organization; after the main narrative comes three appendices that seem like they could have been included in the body, a bad decision exacerbated by a few references in the latter to events described in the former. But overall this book leaves the reader with a sense of its subject more than most biographies I've read.

Andrew says

I have to admit, I bought this book more because of its author, than its subject. When I saw it on the book

store shelf, I thought to myself, "Robert E. Lee, by Roy Blount, Jr... the Wait, Wait Don't Tell Me guy?" Yep, that's the one.

Unsurprisingly, this book is an unconventional look at Robert E. Lee's life. Blount focuses on plumbing the depths of the complexity of Lee's character. The Marble Man so often portrayed in other works is eschewed for a subtler portrait of a man with all too human failings and surprising humor. As a humorist, Blount maybe dwells too much on Lee's humor, but it is nice to see some color added to the all too grave picture that's usually presented of Lee.

While this book explores territory that isn't the usual focus of studies of R.E. Lee, it is also a relatively short book, and somewhat lacking in depth. The history that serves as a background to the biography is a particularly weak point. Much of Blount's coverage of wider events is oversimplified or even inaccurate.

While this book was enjoyable, I wouldn't recommend it as THE book to read about Lee. I would say, however, that Blount has written an interesting supplement to wider study of Lee or the Civil War in general.

Bill says

This book has been part of my larger foray into reading about Lee, and with that context, I would say this was a helpful short biography. Blount gives plenty of facts, but also lots of opinion, which is fine, especially as he is fairly upfront about his occasional psychoanalyzing. My take on Lee is....evolving. Perhaps coming up with more questions than answers!

Maxwell Miller says

This biography describes Robert E. Lee by comparison to contemporaries. While this tactic is interesting and useful, I felt like I learned more about some of those people, particularly Lee's family members, than I did about R.E. Lee himself.

Some of the other reviews criticize this book for being anti-Lee. I didn't find the book necessarily anti-Lee. By no means was it pro-Lee. Nor did I find it to be objective. I think the best way to describe the books view on Lee is that the author doesn't attempt to shed modern morality. He looks at Lee through critical modern eyes.

The book is also a little confusing at times. The author uses a tremendous amount of references and spends very little time providing context and explanation. Anyone who isn't already a Civil War scholar and learned in literature might not understand everything said.

I also was confused by the author's somewhat sporadic writing style.

All in all I learned that Robert E. Lee is a fascinating man who is well worth learning about. But perhaps it is best to start with a different biography.

Stephen says

Blount's biography of Robert E Lee is short, general, and weird. It's ideal for a casual reader who doesn't know anything at all about Lee, aside from his leadership role in the Army of Northern Virginia. Having read quite a few histories of the eastern campaigns and gleaned the general details about Lee's life through those books' background information, I found this mostly useful for information on Lee's father and early childhood. The book is largely complimentary of a figure whose aura rivals even Washington's in the South, even as Blount devotes an entire appendix to Lee's difficult relationship with slavery; Lee's attitude was one of deep disdain rather than public condemnation. I found the biography strange for its frequent sidebars, however. Blount goes off on tangents about spelling and Lee's encounters with men of letters, and enjoys trying to make connections to Freudian psychology. I suppose media personalities are allowed a few quirks when they attempt a more serious piece of work. It's enjoyable reading, just a trifle odd.

Mickey says

Like all of the Penguin Lives biography series, this biography is short to the point of fitting somewhere between a long summary and a proper biography. I've read several books in the series now, and this installment fits in with the others, but I feel that it is missing a layer of cohesive opinion about the subject. To me, Blount focuses on the charming anecdotes involving Lee, which are interesting, but he doesn't give enough space to the man's overall influence and effect on his times. This biography was great in the specifics, but failed to draw back and look at the big picture. Its focus on the domestic and social side of Lee was refreshing, but if you are going to condense so much of Lee's life, that would've been the part to cut. Blount definitely followed the common trend of refraining from romanticizing or mythologizing people who have historically gotten that treatment in earlier biographies, but does not do it in the usual ways (by discussing his faults and mistakes, as with Napoleon's biography) as much as trying to humanize him by showing him engaging in frivolity.
