

A Traveler's History:
In the Footsteps of Stonewall Jackson

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A Traveler's History

By Richard Salzberg

In the Footsteps of Stonewall Jackson

By Clint Johnson

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The effects of the American Civil War, still tangible and relevant, continue to affect all of us. If only as a Tolkienesque national memory, popular culture indicates that to varying degrees most Americans are interested in that period, a darker sort of American Camelot filled with tragedy, excitement, and incredible span.

Rich characters from the Civil War sagas abound and endure, if only for their otherworldliness and color, and somehow – despite the depredations of development – the land itself engenders an accessibility. Thomas Jonathan “Stonewall” Jackson has remained at the forefront of such figures, and *In the Footsteps of Stonewall Jackson* helps to understand why.

Author Clint Johnson describes Jackson as one of the “most psychologically complex military leaders in history,” adding: “I doubt anyone can truly say they understand Jackson.” Clearly mortal, although a legend during the last two years of his own short life (he was only 39 when he died), Jackson had also been perceived during his pre-Civil War life to be an abject failure.

In the Footsteps makes great strides in making Thomas J. Jackson understandable via its engaging biography; and the book also succeeds as a series of precise history lessons via its almanac format.

All heard variants of the First Bull Run exhortation: “There stands Jackson like a stone wall. Rally behind the Virginians!” But few even among Civil War aficionados would not be surprised by the image of a miserable young Lt. Thomas J. Jackson, U.S. Army, in the wilds of tropical Indian country.

In January 1851, Jackson went on his first scouting mission in Florida, taking a patrol to Lake Tohopekaliga, about 40 miles northeast of Fort Meade (near where Disney World stands today). Jackson and his 14-man patrol marched 90 miles in six days and did not see a single Seminole. The best Jackson could do was report that he had found two wooden poles that he thought might have been used by Indians to cook their game.

There is the even younger Tom Jackson in New York. Like Robert E. Lee before him, after heroic service in the Mexican War he had been assigned to Fort Hamilton, a still active army post in Brooklyn.

As an artillery officer with nothing to shoot at, Jackson had good, light duty compared to Lee, who had come to the fort to fix leaks in its walls and roof. Jackson was

often able to complete his reports early. When he could, he caught a boat across the river to Manhattan to visit bookstores and art galleries.

Lee was 17 years Jackson's senior. Their paths may have crossed during their time in Mexico, where Jackson was a callow lieutenant and Lee already recognized as the rising star in the young nation's army. Rather incredibly, both men were members of St. John's Episcopal Church in Brooklyn, with Jackson baptized there in 1849.

After his second marriage (his first wife having died in childbirth) the romantic Jackson honeymooned for the second time at Niagara Falls in 1857, and brought his new love Anna to New York, climbing to the top of Trinity Church "to see the city's skyline" and sharing some of his old haunts.

Anna adored her eccentric hypochondriac husband, supporting his quest for natural cures of all sorts that took them well beyond Manhattan to hot springs in western New York, Massachusetts, and Vermont.

Such revelations are the greatest value of *In the Footsteps*, along with the information that these and so many other sites well beyond the battlefields of Virginia are still extant.

Of course no book on Stonewall could omit his trials and accomplishments in "the War." Here too author Johnson does an excellent job of recapturing time and place (with helpful contemporary photographs), detailing an effective portrait of the furious, curious figure that could only be stopped by the fates, and the fire of his own men. Along with the famous battles and inspired movements against what should have been impossible odds, the reader encounters Jackson's Arthurian relationship with Lee, and his tempestuous dealings with almost everyone else.

We are also there at the end, in 1863. The small white overseer's house where Jackson died at Guinea Station can still be visited, with the same clock ticking on the mantel as last heard by the mortally wounded mystic. Jackson the zealous Christian had always prayed to die on a Sunday, and he did; and Jackson the lonely orphan boy from West Virginia, ever in search of a family's love, died with Anna and the five month-old baby Julia at his bedside.

In his last minutes, Jackson seemed to return to the battlefield. . . Then his eyes opened wide. He looked at the ceiling and seemed to sink back into the bed in relaxation. He said one final sentence: "Let us cross over the river and rest in the shade of the trees."

Minor criticisms aside (a map might have a distorted feel, and Gen. Barnard Bee – author of the famed "Stonewall" sobriquet – is assigned the name "Bernard"), *In the Footsteps of Stonewall Jackson* is a remarkable accomplishment as a unique biographic travelogue. Useful in the hands of aficionados, its format and readability will also be welcome to newer Civil War enthusiasts and adventuresome travelers.

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