

The New Criterion

Features

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Who cares about Robert E. Lee?

by [Daniel Mark Epstein](#)

On Elizabeth Brown Pryor's new look at the Confederate general.

Is a person's character ever simple? Personality is such a tangle of physical and spiritual phenomena mysterious in themselves; this is as true of the postman as it is of the heroes we meet in history books. Yet historians often go about their business as if a president or general were a jigsaw puzzle with his pieces scattered about, awaiting the right researcher's hand to assemble the "complete picture"; or a lockbox that must yield to the right conceptual key; or a monumental statue that has only to be cracked open to reveal the true figure within.

Robert Edward Lee (1807–1870) falls into this third category, an icon whose impression during the Civil War and Reconstruction was so grand, so monolithic, that during the last seven years of his life he became the emblem of the Confederate cause. The South needed an emblem and did not wait for Lee's death to do him the honor. His noble suffering after ...

Daniel Mark Epstein wrote the libretto for the opera *Jefferson and Poe*, with music by Damon Ferrante.

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