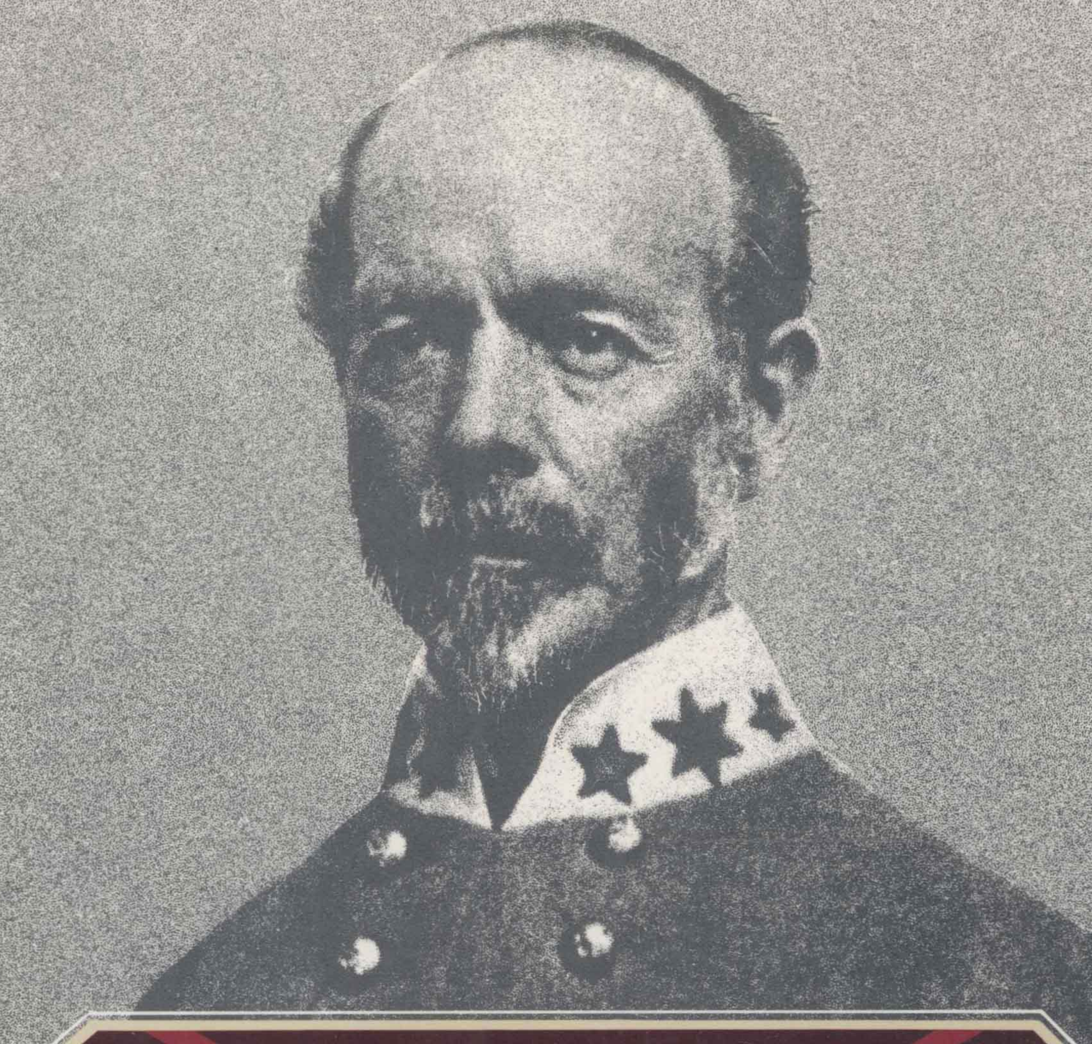

JOSEPH E. JOHNSTON

A Civil War Biography

Craig L. Symonds

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CRAIG L. SYMONDS

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For Marylou

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Craig L. Symonds
Annapolis, Spring 1991

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JOSEPH E. JOHNSTON

Prologue

Joseph E. Johnston and History

He was the first graduate in the history of the Military Academy at West Point to be promoted to a general's rank in the regular army. He was the most senior U.S. Army officer to resign his commission and "go South" to fight for the Confederacy in 1861. He was the only man to command both of the Confederacy's principal field armies—the Army of Northern Virginia in 1861–62, and the Army of Tennessee in 1864. He won the South's first victory, at Manassas in July 1861, and its last, at Bentonville, North Carolina, in April 1865. Many of his contemporaries considered him to be the greatest southern field commander of the war; others ranked him second—and not by much—only to his West Point classmate Robert E. Lee. Both Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman considered him the most skillful opponent they faced during the war.

And yet Joseph E. Johnston is strangely absent from the pantheon of Confederate heroes, a pantheon that is dominated by Robert E. Lee and "Stonewall" Jackson, both of whom are frozen in idealized bas-relief along with Jefferson Davis at Stone Mountain, Georgia, east of Atlanta. Lee's memory is sacred at Washington and Lee University, as is Jackson's at V.M.I. Other Confederate heroes include a number of men who served under Johnston

and who greatly admired him, men like Jeb Stuart and A. P. Hill, P. G. T. Beauregard and Albert Sidney Johnston (no relation). Many would include even John Bell Hood, whose brash and irresponsible leadership destroyed the army that he inherited from Joe Johnston. All of these men are remembered in monuments and memorials from Fort Hood in Texas to Fort A. P. Hill in Virginia.

For much of the late nineteenth century, Johnston shared in the South's deification of its heroes. Many of the popular group portraits of the postwar years linked Johnston with Robert E. Lee and "Stonewall" Jackson as the unofficial trinity of the South. But after the turn of the century, he was included less frequently. Today, there is but one statue of Joe Johnston in the Old South. It is on the main street of Dalton, Georgia, where he made his headquarters during the winter of 1863–64. He stands there now, staring eastward—looking, a wag would say, for a line of retreat in case the Yankees outflanked his position. During spring break not long ago, students from the local junior college sold T-shirts depicting Johnston's figure in swim trunks and holding a cooler. It is an indignity he would have felt deeply, for his public image was important to him.

Aside from that one statue, and a bust in the Virginia state capitol at Richmond, there are few extant reminders of Johnston's role in the American Civil War. There is no monument to him at his birthplace near Farmville, Virginia, no statue of him to commemorate his victory at Manassas, or at Seven Pines where he fell wounded and had to be carried from the field; there is no memorial at Kennesaw Mountain, at Bentonville, or anywhere else. The explanation is that Americans, North and South, have had trouble understanding who he was and in agreeing about what he did. The public record is clear enough. His long list of campaigns fills up the entries dedicated to him in encyclopedias. But the man himself has been difficult to illuminate. One reason is that he left behind few private letters: a handful to his brothers, a few dozen to his friends, and a score or so to his wife. And even in these he is reserved, as if holding something back or unwilling to reveal his inner self too clearly. When in 1887 a prospective biographer wrote to ask him where he could find information about his life, Johnston wrote back, "I am afraid . . . that the difficulty of finding 'data' will make you drop the enterprize."

Another reason for Johnston's relative obscurity is that his record of performance during the Civil War has provoked wide disagreement. He commanded Confederate armies in four battles—Manassas (1861), Seven Pines (1862), Kennesaw Mountain (1864), and Bentonville (1865). He, at least, counted all four as Confederate victories. But none of them was decisive, and in between he avoided as many battles as he fought. He failed to save Pemberton at Vicksburg in 1863, and he retreated deep into the heart of Georgia in front of Sherman's inexorable advance in 1864. Throughout much of the war, he was troublesome, secretive, and occasionally sullen in his relations with the Confederate president, Jefferson Davis.

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