

Leader of the Lost Cause

"Jefferson Davis, American Patriot," by Hudson Strode (*Harcourt, Brace*. 460 pp. \$6.75), is the first volume of a new biography of the President of the Confederacy. It is reviewed below by Professor T. Harry Williams of Louisiana State University, author of a number of volumes on the War Between the States.

By T. Harry Williams

AS THE leader of the militant South after the death of John C. Calhoun, Jefferson Davis was one of the dominating figures in American political life between 1850 and 1860. Then he became the head of the most formidable attempt and—if one excepts the vague venture of Aaron Burr and the hazy plots of the New England Federalists in 1814—the only attempt ever made to divide the American Union. Add to this that his life epitomizes that most appealing of all tragic themes, the gallant man who goes down to defeat battling great odds, and it would seem that the biographers would have swarmed all over him.

And yet the strange truth is that less than fifteen biographies of the Confederate President have been published since 1868 when the first life appeared. None can be considered as an authoritative or an adequate treatment. Why have all the Civil War biographers of the past quarter of a century (with the exception of Robert McElroy) passed him by? Undoubtedly the explanation lies in his career and his personality. He was the civil leader of a lost cause, of a cause that sought to halt an inevitable trend toward centralism and to destroy national unification. The military leaders of this cause have been invested with martial glamour, but Davis, its civil director, has seemed rustic, backward, and out of harmony with the ideals of the modern world. Moreover, many Southerners, seeking a scapegoat for the failure of the Confederacy, blamed Davis for the collapse of their country. As a person Davis has repelled biographers in much the same way that he rebuffed his contemporaries. He was, or seemed to be, cold, distant, arrogant—and wordy and tedious as well. In short, he appeared to most people as a good man but a dull one.

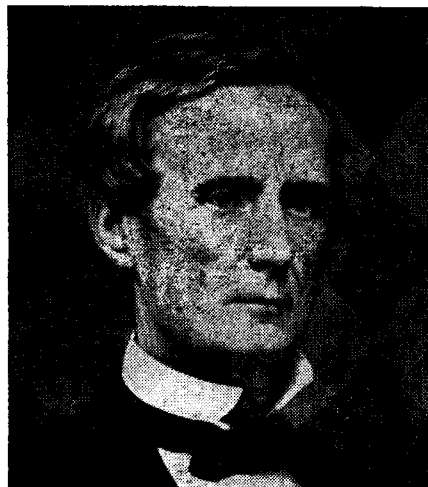
With the present vigorous popular interest in the Civil War about to be intensified by the approach of the centennial years, it was inevitable that sooner or later somebody would bring out a new biography of Davis. First in the field is Professor Hudson Strode, who teaches Shakespeare and creative writing at the University of Alabama and who previously has written seven travel books. Apparently he has been working on his project since 1951, which is none too long a time to devote to an individual of Davis's importance and accomplishments. The volume under review, "Jefferson Davis, American Patriot," deals with the years from 1808 to 1861, and treats of Davis's early years, his education at West Point, his army service, his two marriages, his career as United States Senator and Secretary of War, and his election as President of the Confederate States. Mr. Strode intends to follow with a second volume, "Jefferson Davis, Confederate President," covering 1861 to 1889.

THE author views his subject with reverence, sympathy, and condonation. It is not going too far to say that his point of view is that of an admiring Southerner of Davis's own time who could admit a few mild faults in the object of his adoration. Although this quality invests the book with a certain bias or slant, it is not in itself a serious drawback. There is value in having Davis presented as his own people saw him; their vision of him, even though not completely accurate,

is a part of the truth of history. The book has other merits. As a writer, Mr. Strode knows how to tell a good story; his narrative is well written, fast-moving, and always interesting.

In his researches he was able to turn up some significant new material, the most valuable of which was five boxes of family papers owned by a Davis descendant in Colorado. Needless to say, these fresh sources throw a revealing light on several aspects of Davis's career and character, and Mr. Strode has thoughtfully reproduced a number of letters never before published. Among other things, these documents demonstrate that the second Mrs. Davis (Varina Howell) possessed some highly neurotic qualities and that she and Joe Davis, Jefferson's older brother, both tried to dominate Jefferson and became intensely jealous of each other. Mr. Strode has been partly successful in achieving one of his announced goals: to show that Davis was a warm human being and not, as is commonly supposed, just a Mississippi edition of the cast-iron Calhoun. At least with his intimate friends and his social inferiors, Davis exhibited many lovable characteristics. As of the present, Mr. Strode's book is the best account we have of the pre-Confederacy Davis.

Although the author has consulted the obvious secondary works dealing with Davis's period, at several points he betrays his amateur historical standing. He seems to think that during the years before the Civil War the South suffered under an oppressively high tariff, while as a matter of fact from 1846 on the tariff was low, exactly as the South wanted it. He does not seem to understand Stephen A. Douglas's motives in introducing the Kansas-Nebraska act or Pierre Soulé's role in the issuance of the Ostend Manifesto or the reasons for Davis's choice as Confederate President. In fine, he is not sufficiently familiar with the latest monographic material. But his most serious fault is that he seems to accept Davis's dictum that the North was engaged in a deliberate struggle to deprive the South of equality in the Union. The South was indeed being pushed into a position of inequality but by profound, inexorable social and economic forces rather than by evil men in the North. That Davis did not see this constituted a tragic limitation in his mentality, and Mr. Strode's failure to see it completely is a limitation in his book. This reviewer has long believed that Davis was not big enough or ruthless enough to direct a revolutionary movement. We await with respectful skepticism Mr. Strode's treatment of Davis the Confederate President.



—Portrait by Joel Webb, from book jacket.

Jefferson Davis—"scapegoat for failure."

Henry Adams's Unforgotten Brother

"Brooks Adams: American Prophet," by **Arthur F. Beringause** (Alfred A. Knopf, 404 pp. \$6), is a biography of a scion of the great New England family who through his writing and friendship with Theodore Roosevelt exerted considerable influence on our intellectual life early in this century. It is reviewed here by Professor Ralph H. Gabriel of Yale University, author of *"The Course of American Democratic Thought."*

By Ralph H. Gabriel

BROOKS ADAMS, grandson of President John Quincy Adams, was forty-five before he found the course of action that gave direction and meaning to his life. Beneficiary of a family trust, he had dabbled with the law and had traveled without particular purpose in Europe. With no aim or work commensurate with the family tradition for public service, the charm of Brooks Adams's undergraduate days at Harvard disappeared, to be replaced by a brusqueness and irascibility that at times came close to neuroticism. In 1893, a year of economic depression, Brooks at the family home in Quincy one day apprehensively asked his older brother Henry to read a manuscript. Henry Adams complied and not only approved but, then and later, adopted many of Brooks's basic conclusions. Out of the episode came an extraordinary interchange of ideas through conversation and by letter that lasted for many years. Ultimately the theories of the two men diverged but not before each had profoundly affected the thought of the other. The manuscript, expanded, was published in London in 1895 under the title *"The Law of Civilization and Decay."*

Four years before he had first shown Henry his essay, Brooks Adams had married Evelyn Davis. The following quotation not only suggests the quality of Arthur F. Beringause's biography *"Brooks Adams"* but also the personality of its hero. "Everyone knew that the engagement of Miss Davis to Mr. Adams had been exceedingly short. It was rumored that the gentleman, residing uncomfortably at his ancestral estate at Quincy, lonely and ill at ease, decided

one day to look for a nubile maiden who could entertain his guests properly. He went, said the gossips of Back Bay, to Mrs. [Henry Cabot] Lodge and exclaimed plaintively: 'If I could find a woman like you I would marry her instantly.' Mrs. Lodge suggested her sister, and the deed was done. On their first ride together Adams, never letting go the reins of his trotters, proposed marriage eternal, swearing all the while that he 'was an eccentric almost to the point of madness,' and that if Miss Davis married him 'she must do it on her own responsibility and at her own risk.' Three weeks later the Right Reverend Frederick D. Huntington, Bishop of Central New York . . . married the lucky pair at a simple service, so ran the newspaper accounts, in the Union Church at Nahant. . . ."

Throughout the rest of his life, but not primarily because of his marriage, Brooks Adams saw much of Henry Cabot Lodge. Into the ken of the two emerged in the 1890s a third Harvard man, young Theodore Roosevelt. Adams's theory of history grew in part out of Darwinism. Adams was also influenced by the economic determinism of Marx. The logic of the Adams theory led him to the conclusion in the 1890s that the center of economic power (and hence of real power) was moving from Britain to America. To seize the power and assume the leadership that an ailing world needed from America the United States must begin building an empire. Such ideas lay behind the advice Brooks Adams gave Theodore Roosevelt early in 1896 before T.R. became Assistant Secretary of the Navy, a post he resigned to become lieutenant colonel of the Rough Riders. "The whole world, as I look at the future and the present," wrote Adams to Roosevelt, "seems to me to be rotting. The one hope for us, the one chance to escape from our slavery [evidenced by the Panic of 1893] even for a year, is war, war which will bring down the British empire. . . . I have watched your career with deep interest. You may remember just a year ago in Washington I told you to sell. You may understand me better now. You are an adventurer and you have one thing to sell—your sword. . . . Capital will not employ you if you have a conscience, a heart, patriotism, honesty, or self-respect.



Clive and Nelson had the luck to live when they could fight, and believe in themselves and their country. Wall Street is a hard master. It only wants men it can buy and own. . . ." When in 1901 Roosevelt became "His Accidency," President of the United States, Adams wrote: "Thou hast it now: King, Cawdor, Glamis. The world can give no more. You hold a place greater than Trajan's, for you are the embodiment [sic] of a power not only vaster than the power of the [Roman] empire, but vaster than men have ever known. . . . You will always stand as the President who began the contest for the supremacy of America against the eastern continent." In the following years Brooks Adams was much at the White House.

BROOKS ADAMS has not enjoyed the same measure of attention accorded his brother, Henry. His books and articles have been known and some of them reprinted. He has never been forgotten but there has not been a fully developed study. Mr. Beringause has built his story primarily from the rich collection of materials now available in the family papers in the Massachusetts Historical Society. But he has searched widely elsewhere and he has noted the appraisals of others.

Three themes run through the book: the character and private life of a brilliant and eccentric aristocrat, the development of Adams's philosophy of history, and the activities of the philosopher in attempting to guide in accordance with his theory the affairs of the nation to the end that civilization might be saved. Each theme has difficulties. But the hardest to handle is the philosophy with its Marxian emphasis on economic determinism, its forecasts (so often verified by events), its anticipations (as of geopolitics), its social Darwinism, its anti-democracy, its state socialism of the fascist type, its picture of an America ruled by an elite (like the Adams family) depending ultimately on force. Mr. Beringause has woven the three themes into a fabric of clear and striking patterns. He has fully documented his story. Brooks Adams, who before 1900 foresaw the polarity of two colossi, the United States and Russia, in the twentieth-century world, is worth more than a passing glance. Mr. Beringause has given us a first-class, objective study.