Biography

The Bishop of the Old South: The Ministry and Civil War Career of Leonidas Polk
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In his compelling, but often plodding, biography of Leonidas Polk (1806—1864), the author, assistant professor of history at Georgia Southwestern State University, offers a portrait of a man whose life combined the nobility of the planter aristocracy with the religious fervor of Southern Episcopalianism and a righteous desire to defend the Southern way of life through a military career. Drawing upon newly available archival materials—including letters and diary entries—Robins chronicles Polk's career from West Point cadet to Episcopal bishop to Confederate general, demonstrating how readily Polk combined his theological and political interests.

Born into the planter class in Tennessee, Polk was destined for a distinguished career as a plantation lord. As a first step toward that goal, he entered West Point in 1823, where he would learn the finer points of honor and nobility so foundational to the Southern way of life.

In his second year, however, Polk experienced an emotional conversion to Christianity, and he soon left the academy to enter Virginia Theological Seminary. His father didn't take so well to this change: when Andrew Jackson asked Polk's father where Leonidas Polk was stationed, his father replied: "By thunder, he's stationed nowhere. He's down at the seminary in Virginia where they're ruining a good soldier to make a poor parson."

Robins traces Polk's career as an Episcopal priest. In short order, Polk serves first as an itinerant priest in the Southwest and then is consecrated as Bishop of Louisiana in 1838. In his career as an Episcopal prelate, Polk's preaching was dominated by the evangelical themes—personal salvation, piety, obedience, and spiritual regeneration—so dominant in Southern Christianity. As Robins demonstrates, "Polk's significance as a religious leader was not based on a formal systematic theology but on his ability to plot a course for Southern Episcopalians so that they could not only survive but compete with the evangelical denominations of the Old South."

Yet, Polk's career remains complex. Though a priest, he owned more than two hundred slaves and justified his ownership by advocating for their religious instruction. He sponsored the establishment of the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee in order to "advance the influence of Episcopalianism and to promote a type of Southern literary and cultural nationalism." Moreover, "by leading his Louisiana diocese out of Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States and by choosing a military assignment, Polk demonstrated the inseparability of his religious beliefs and his worldview."

Although Robins's prosaic account of Polk's life suffers from a lack of lively storytelling, his study shines a brilliant light not only on nineteenth-century Southern culture but also on one of the most enigmatic Southern figures of the Civil War.

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