



Lincoln Lore

Number 1788

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February, 1988

DEATH'S JESTER: JOHN SINGLETON MOSBY

In April 1864 a woman entered Washington, D.C., with a lock of hair for President Abraham Lincoln. She said that John Singleton Mosby, the legendary Confederate cavalryman, had cut off the strands of his own hair to be presented to Lincoln with the message that he would soon come to pay a personal call on the president. Mosby himself popularized the story in a series of lectures published as a book in 1887.

Though the anecdote sounds far fetched, it was reported in the *Washington Star* on April 24, 1864. As the letter reproduced on this page shows, Mosby repeatedly stated that he had sent the lock of hair to Lincoln and that he heard that the president laughed in appreciation of the joke. Mosby told W.T. Chambers in the letter:

I am in receipt of your letter of yesterday. It is not true as published that Mr. Lincoln ever sent me a lock of his hair — I did once send him a lock of mine & it was stated at the time that he enjoyed the joke. The story is told in 'Mosby's War Reminiscences' — my son has the book.

Mosby firmly believed that war has a lighter side, and he surely appreciated Lincoln's sense of humor as much as Lincoln did Mosby's. He liked the idea that Lincoln possessed a funnybone and put in his memoirs of his most famous exploit this story: "There is an anecdote told of Mr. Lincoln that, when it was reported to him that [General] Stoughton had been captured, he remarked, with characteristic humor, that he did not so much mind the loss of a general — for he could make another in five minutes — but he hated to lose the horses."

The lock of hair story is an unbelievable tale, but Mosby was an unbelievable character, quite unlike any other famous leader produced by the Civil War. He was rough — had served a jail term, in fact, for shooting a college classmate — and yet his later published reminiscences were so sprinkled with literary allusions that they impressed Edmund Wilson, the famous twentieth-century literary critic. He was humorous ("mocking" is the accurate term that Wilson uses) but always ready to burn his enemies alive. He scoffed at romantic notions of war, boasting that he was the first cavalry leader to consign the sabre to the museum of useless antiquities, and yet he maintained an almost chivalric personal ethic and described one action by his troops this way: "As an affair of arms it passed anything that had been done in the Shenandoah Campaign and recalled the days

when Knighthood was in flower." Such language could hardly be distinguished from that of John Esten Cooke or any other flowery chronicler of Southern arms. Like cavalry general J.E.B. Stuart, Mosby dressed as a cavalier might, with a plumed hat and a scarlet-lined cloak, but he helped revolutionize the use of cavalry in warfare, as J.E.B. Stuart did not. He reached legendary status by the time he was thirty-five years old, and his exploits inspired a narrative poem by no less a writer than Herman Melville published only a year after the war was over. And yet Mosby remains underappreciated by scholars and too little studied in the twentieth century.

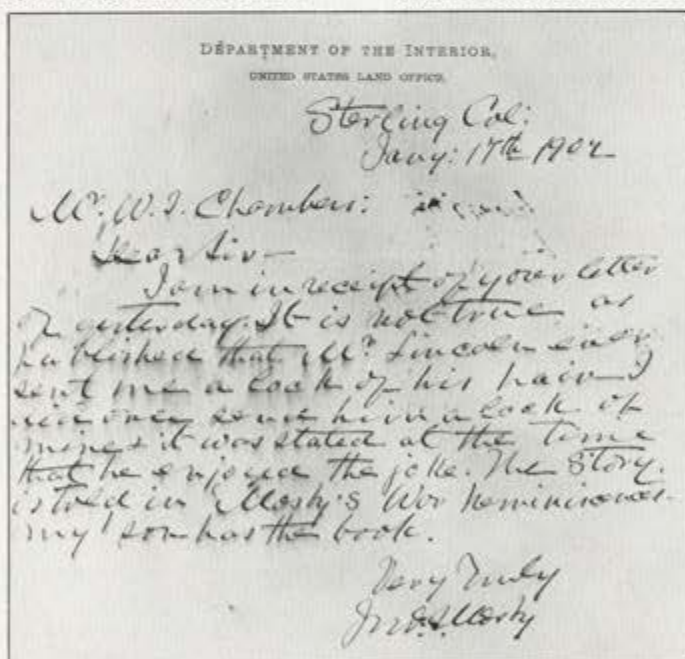
His career seems strangely neglected — for a man whose views of warfare sound so forward-looking. "There was no man

in the Confederate army," Mosby said of himself, "who had less of the spirit of knight-errantry in him, or took a more practical view of war. . . ." In another characterization he described his theory of war as "severely practical — one not acquired by reading the Waverly novels. . . . Strategy is only another name for deception and can be practised by any commander." Yet, in a passage misread by Edmund Wilson, Mosby carefully circumscribed the advanced quality of his thinking on war:

I never admired and did not imitate the example of the commander who declined the advantage of the first fire. But, while I conducted war on the theory that the end of it is to secure peace by the destruction of the resources of the enemy, with as small a loss as possible to my own side, there

is no authenticated act of mine which is not perfectly in accordance with approved military usage. Grant, Sheridan, and Stonewall Jackson had about the same ideas that I had on the subject of war. I will further add that I was directly under the orders of [J.E.B.] Stuart up to the time of his death, in May, 1864, and after that time, of Gen. Robert E. Lee, until the end of the war. With both of these two great Christian soldiers I had the most confidential relations. My military conduct received from them not only approbation, but many encomiums.

In quoting from this, Edmund Wilson left out all the material before the sentence on Grant, Sheridan, and Jackson quoted here, so that it looked as though Mosby was saying he was as modern as those three generals. Thus Wilson's quotation reads:



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR,
UNITED STATES LAND OFFICE.

Sterling Cal.
July 17th 1862

W. T. Chambers: Sir—
Dear Sir—
I am in receipt of your letter of yesterday. It is not true as published that Mr. Lincoln ever sent me a lock of his hair — I did once send him a lock of mine & it was stated at the time that he enjoyed the joke. The story is told in 'Mosby's War Reminiscences' — my son has the book.

Very Truly
J. S. Mosby



From the Louis A. Warren
Lincoln Library and Museum

"Mosby's Chaplain at His Devotions," illustration from Scott's *Partisan Life with Col. John S. Mosby*.

The combat between Richard and Saladin by the Diamond of the Desert is a beautiful picture for the imagination to dwell on, but it isn't war, and was no model for me. . . . Grant, Sheridan, and Stonewall Jackson had about the same ideas that I had on the subject of war.

In fact, Mosby compared himself to Grant, Sheridan, and Jackson by way of saying he lived up to the same code of war as other mainstream Civil War heroes, and then he clinched his argument by reference to his good standing with those Christian soldiers, Robert E. Lee and J.E.B. Stuart.

The problem with mocking humor is that the reader does not know where it stops. To be sure, Mosby sincerely revered Lee and Stuart. He expended so much literary effort covering up the faults of Stuart that he sadly neglected telling about his own exploits until too late. (Mosby's unfinished memoirs were put together from the sketchiest of notes by his brother-in-law.) But there was a distinctly anti-establishment and slightly unchristian air about Mosby's men. Mosby himself complained that

Although a revolutionary government, none was ever so much under the domination of red tape as the one in



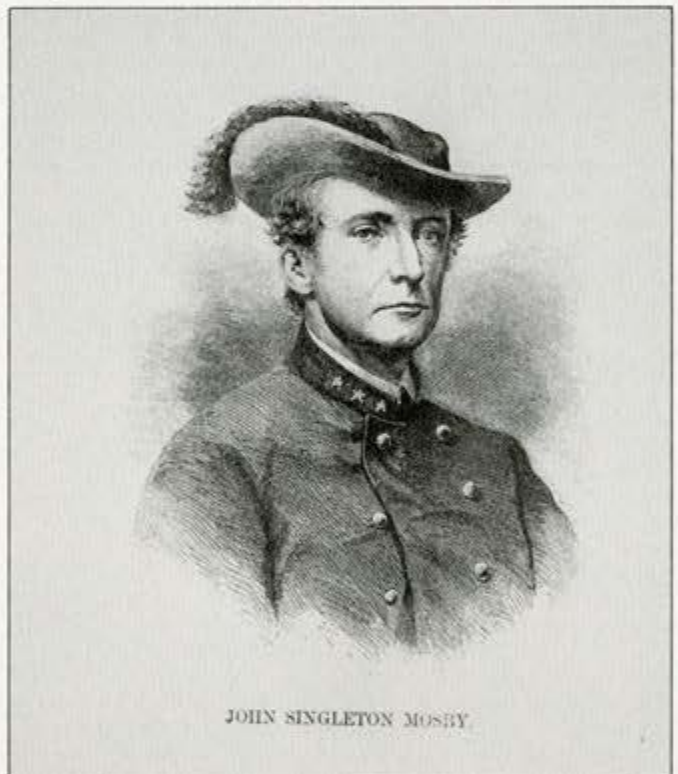
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"The Parson's Stag Dance," from Scott's *Partisan Life* of Col. John S. Mosby.

Richmond. The martinets who controlled it were a good deal like the hero of Moliere's comedy, who complained that his antagonist had wounded him by thrusting in *carte*, when, according to the rule, it should have been in *tierce*. I cared nothing for the form of a thrust if it brought blood. . . . I always had a Confederate fire in my rear as well as that of the public enemy in my front. I will add that I never appealed in vain for justice either to General R. E. Lee, General Stuart, or the Secretary of War, Mr. Seddon. . . . The men who followed me with so much zeal were not, perhaps, altogether of the saintly character or excited by the pious aspirations of the Canterbury pilgrims who knelt at the shrine of Thomas a Becket.

In fact, there was something distinctly impious about Mosby's men.

Several of them were interviewed by John Scott, of Fauquier County, Virginia. Scott wrote *Partisan Life with Col. John S. Mosby* after the war but chose an epistolary form that made it sound as though he had collected the letters of a Mosby trooper written during the war. In one instance Scott told the story of paying a visit to the home of "the Rev. Dr. Gog, the chaplain of our command."



JOHN SINGLETON MOSBY

From the Louis A. Warren
Lincoln Library and Museum

John Singleton Mosby as cavalier.

A large and powerful iron-gray horse, marked with the United States brand, which I at once recognized as the property of the parson, was fastened by a halter-chain to a heavy block. . . . To the trees in the grove full fifteen horses, with military equipments, were fastened, and I reasonably inferred that their riders had sought this holy place for religious consolation. . . . I drew near an open window . . . [and] obtained a view . . . of the chaplain himself, not occupied with sacred meditation, prayer, or penitential hymns, but instead I beheld a scene which has shaken my confidence in the severity at least of his religious code. The floor of the room could not, I am sure, have been swept since the owner had left the house, or *refugeed*, in the phraseology of the day. In addition to an astounding accumulation of trash, it was scattered over with odd boots and shoes, sword-belts, broken bridles and discarded gear of all kinds. . . . I did not find . . . Dr. Gog engaged in the exercises of religion, but instead he was sitting at the head of a table in a huge



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Mosby shortly after the war.

arm-chair, engaged in the unclerical employment of playing cards with his visitors. . . . A tumbler of spirit was set on his right hand, from which the doctor would often sip with evident relish.

An amusing conversation ensued when a young and somewhat nose-y new recruit asked the parson to what denomination he belonged before the war.

Parson. "I was a Black Rock Baptist, and had been a Southern Methodist."

The youth again inquired: "Were you in the ministry, reverend sir?"

Parson. "My master, you are over-inquisitive for a new-comer, but I have no objection to satisfying your curiosity, as it may perchance be of service to you. It will teach you, at least, to begin where I ended. I commenced my religious life as an Episcopalian, but soon grew offended at their starch and gentility. I next tried the Presbyterians, and abode with them until they got to looking into my life, as they called it. I then got with the Methodists and Baptists. I tried the Campbellites, too, for a time, and lodged a few weeks with the Free Communion Baptists, passing from one to the other like a bad shilling. I have now the honor to inform you, my master, that I am a preacher in the great Universalist Church, were I expect to remain for the rest of my natural life."

All. "Good, good! That's the very church for Dr. Gog."

Parson. "Yes; and, let me inform you, it is the very Church for every one of you; for what chance have any of you for heaven unless through the general amnesty which that Church has proclaimed to all sinners! Your master knew this when he besought me to take charge of your souls."

Only the historically gullible would swallow such a scene as this, but it is entirely possible that it is the sort of profane scene that this so-called Christian soldier and his men would have enjoyed. And the parson appears throughout Scott's account, in one irreverent misadventure after another, shocking pious ladies by wild dancing, drinking "blockade," and swearing.

Irreverence, swashbuckling, and a certain ruthlessness about bloodletting seem to have characterized Mosby and his men, as did resourcefulness, ingenuity, wit, deceptiveness, boldness, and bluffing. Another important aspect of this partisan operation, not much emphasized in Mosby's reminiscences, was plunder.

One suspects that Mosby might never have mentioned it at all, had he not been forced to go to such lengths to prove that his troops were legitimate soldiers and not mere brigands.

Federal authorities during the war regularly referred to Mosby's troops as a "gang," and captives suspected of operating with Mosby's forces were often accused of robbery and horse stealing. Mosby deflected criticism with anecdotal levity:

Now it must not be thought that the habit of appropriating the enemy's goods was peculiar to my men — through all the ages it has been the custom of war. Not long after this incident I had to suffer from the same operation — was shot at night and stripped of my clothes. Forty years afterwards a lady returned to me the hat which I was wearing. She said that her uncle, Lieutenant-Colonel Coles of the regiment that captured it, had given it to her as a relic of the war. That is war. I am willing to admit, however, that in a statement of mutual accounts at the time my men were largely in debt to [General Philip] Sheridan's men.

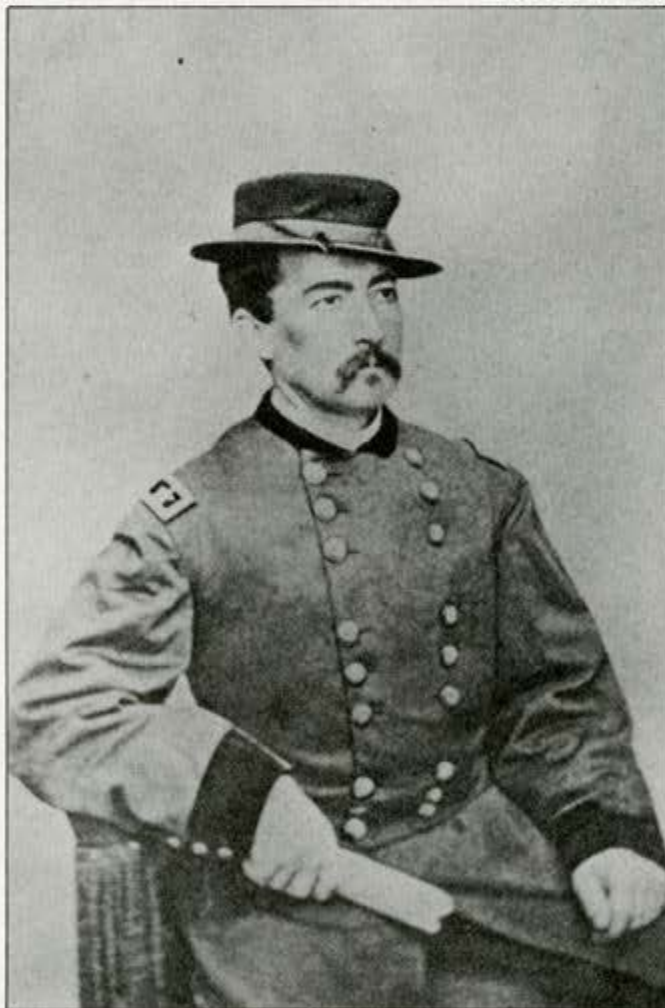
But to prove that his men were soldiers, he had ultimately to explain how they were organized: "My command was organized under an act of the Confederate Congress to raise partisan corps; it applied the principle of maritime prize law to land war. Of course, the motive of the act was to stimulate enterprise." That was about all Mosby said in this regard in his memoirs.

In the earlier lectures published in 1887, he was somewhat more explicit, though attempting to identify as ultimately patriotic the complex of motives that moved his men:

Patriotism, as well as love of adventure, impelled them. If they got rewards in the shape of horses and arms, these were devoted, like their lives, to the cause in which they were fighting. They were made no richer by what they got, except in the ability to serve their country.

But what kind of men were they?

(To be continued)



From the Louis A. Warren
Lincoln Library and Museum

Philip Sheridan.

CIVIL WAR INSTITUTE AT GETTYSBURG COLLEGE, 1988

For information write to G. S. Boritt, Director, Civil War Institute, Box 435, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA 17325. Telephone: 717-337-6555.

PROGRAM

Sunday, June 26
Evening Reception

Monday, June 27
Morning Michael Shaara, "The Killer Angels"
Afternoon Charles H. Glatfelter, "Gettysburg College Observes the Battle Anniversaries"
Extra Robert Bloom, "Gettysburg, Then & Now;" a Slide Lecture or Dave Hedrick, "The Last Reunion, 1938:" guided tour of photo exhibit
Evening Jacob Sheads, "Union Brass at Gettysburg"

Tuesday, June 28
Morning Choice of four Battlefield Tours of Day 1
Afternoon Jacob Sheads, "Confederate Brass at Gettysburg"
Extra Anna Jane Moyer, "The Last Reunion, 1938" and Fritz Updike, "The Last Reunion: Reminiscences of an Eyewitness"
Evening Caroline Moseley, "Songs of the War: A Lecture and Performance"

Wednesday, June 29
Morning Choice of four Battlefield Tours of Day 2
Afternoon Gerald F. Linderman, "Embattled Courage"
Extra Rick Selcer, "The Pickett Who Came to Gettysburg"
Evening Richard Wheeler, "Witness to Gettysburg"

Thursday, June 30
Morning Choice of four Battlefield Tours of Day 3
Afternoon Free Time
125th Anniversary Parade in Town
Evening Ed Longacre, "Cavalry at Gettysburg"

Friday, July 1
Morning David Eisenhower, "Dwight D. Eisenhower's Battle of Gettysburg"
Afternoon Eugene C. Harter, "The Lost Colony of the Confederacy"
Extra Tour of the Historic Gettysburg Churches, led by Charles Glatfelter
Evening Farewell Banquet

Saturday, July 2
Morning Students depart after breakfast

FACULTY

LECTURERS:

David Eisenhower, author of *Eisenhower at War: 1943-1945* (1986).
Charles H. Glatfelter, Franklin Professor of History, Gettysburg College, author of *A Salutary Influence* (1987).
Eugene C. Harter, retired diplomat, author of *The Lost Colony of the Confederacy* (1985).
Gerald F. Linderman, Professor of History, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, author of *Embattled Courage* (1987).
Edward G. Longacre, Strategic Air Command, is the author of *Cavalry at Gettysburg*.
Caroline Moseley, Princeton University, scholar and performer of 19th century popular music.
Michael Shaara, Pulitzer Prize winning novelist, author of *The Killer Angels* (1974).
Col. Jacob Sheads, Gettysburg's most famous guide.
Richard Wheeler, author of *Witness to Gettysburg* (1987), alternate selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club, 1988.

EXTRAS:

Robert L. Bloom taught history at Gettysburg College for over three decades.
David T. Hedrick, special collections librarian, Gettysburg College.
Anna Jane Moyer, reference librarian, Gettysburg College.
Richard Selcer, CWI alum, teaches history and is working on a biography of Pickett.
Fritz Updike, CWI alum, worked as a newspaperman for *Rome Daily Sentinel* in New York for over 60 years.

BATTLEFIELD GUIDES:

Ed Bearss, Chief historian at the National Park Service.
Bill Bowling, Battlefield Guide, Gettysburg National Military Park.
Roy E. Frampton, Battlefield Guide, Gettysburg National Military Park.
Ed Guy, Battlefield Guide, Gettysburg National Military Park.
Kathy Georg Harrison, Historian at Gettysburg National Military Park, co-author of *Nothing But Glory: Pickett's Division at Gettysburg* (1987).
Marshall Krollick, noted lecturer and guide.
Jay Luvaas, professor at the U.S. Army War College, and author of *Guide to the Battle of Gettysburg* (1986).
Bob Mullen, Battlefield Guide, Gettysburg National Military Park.
Bill Ridinger, CWI alum, professor emeritus, Southern Connecticut State University.
John Schildt, author of many books including *The Road to Gettysburg*.
Our guides have authored dozens of articles and books on the Civil War.
Gabor S. Boritt, co-author of *The Confederate Image* (1987), directs the Civil War Institute.