CONCERNING JEFFERSON DAVIS

By Walter L. Fleming

IN May 1908, a hundred years after the birth of Jefferson Davis, Dunbar Rowland, state archivist of Mississippi, began the collecting of Davis letters and papers. Now, well edited and in dignified form, they are published by the State of Mississippi in honor of her great son. The search for material was long and tedious, extending to public and private collections throughout the United States, and the result is one of the most valuable collections for historical purposes made since Lincoln's papers were published. It is probably as complete as we have any right to expect but there are indications that some papers have been withheld or were lost. The magazine articles written by Davis are not printed, and much of the material in the Rebellion Records is not reproduced.

There is disappointingly little about Davis's early life. For the first thirty five years there is almost nothing, and not much about the intimate, personal side of his life at any time; nothing about many half forgotten scandals and whispered things that we thought might be cleared up when the Davis papers came to light. But as much as possible Davis kept his private affairs out of his correspondence and the public eye. Unless someone questioned his own integrity or his record Davis refused to disclose unpleasant facts or make damaging exposures. For example, persistent inquiries about General Grant's army record when Davis was secretary of war brought no response. He wrote and said nothing of the weakness or faults of this or that one, made no disclosures of embarassing secrets unless attacked himself or

made a scapegoat for another's wrongdoing. Then he could dig as deeply into the past as anyone and bring up the most damaging evidence. Witness the disclosures of the unlovely passages in the records of Generals Scott, Beauregard, Jordan, Joseph E. Johnston, and W. T. Sherman.

So it is mainly for political and military history that the papers have value. Several lines run through the whole; among them the slavery problem, political, economic, and social; theories of government; Davis's work for the United States army and West Point; the development of the west. The record of lifelong friendships, too, is here and of some friendships that did not last. The dry bones of state sovereignty, of squatter sovereignty, of slavery, take on form and substance again in these fiery debates of long ago.

The historian of the west will mine the six thousand pages for facts and points of view. Davis's interest in the west begins with his seven years of army service on the western frontiers and abides to the end. His strong support of western development when in Congress, his surveys, while secretary of war, to discover practical routes for transcontinental railways, his interest in the Indian problem—all these are set out here with absorbing detail. He knew more about the west than many a westerner. But in clearing up the debris of the Mexican War Davis became entangled, evidently to his own disgust, in the slavery controversy and never escaped. This statement made in the heat of debate on the Compromise of 1850, when Davis was still holding strongly to a broad nationalism, ought to be preserved:

> The man does not breathe at whose door the charge of disunion might not as well be laid as at mine. The son of a revolutionary soldier, attachment to this Union was among the first lessons of my childhood; bred to the service of my country, from boyhood to mature age I wore its uniform. Through the brightest portion of my life, I was accustomed to see our flag, historic emblem of the Union, rise with the rising and fall with the setting sun. I look upon it now with the affection of early love, and seek to maintain and preserve it by a strict adherence to the Constitution, from which it had its birth, and by the nurture of which its stars have come so much to outnumber its original stripes.

From a constructive national statesmanship Davis is forced to the defense of a section and an anachronistic institution. He sees clearly all sides of his own problems but does not appreciate the problems of his opponents. He has no faith in abolitionists, no respect for their sincerity. There is a remarkable foreseeing of the end, of emancipation under martial law, of the reconstruction measures, even of the production of long staple cotton in the Imperial Valley.

Capacity for friendship, long and faithful, is shown in the correspondence between Davis and Jones, Drayton, Northrop, and Wright, his classmates at Transylvania and West Point—later two of them Union men and two Confederates. For the sake of his friendship men gave up position, went to prison, left home and joined the Confederacy. There were other good friends in the Union army at a time when attachment to Davis was an embarrassing fact. In speeches and letters Davis gave to Zachary Taylor, whose daughter he married, a nonpolitical support which more than once brought suspicion upon the quality of his Democracy, but here again we wish for more light on their relations from 1835 to 1846.

As secretary of war under Pierce and as chairman of the Senate Committee on Military Affairs Davis's

reputation for efficiency and accomplishment was established beyond question, and documents and letters here available can give only additional evidence of that fact. He was an organizer, always progressive, on the lookout for new military inventions, a strong supporter of the interests of the army and the military academy.

A reading of the volumes covering the Civil War gives an impression of harassed statesmanship, of competency in military matters, and — strange to say, for most of us have thought otherwise — of considerate action and patient forbearance in the face of difficulties caused by petty controversies among his generals, the opposition of state governors and politicians, and the paralysis of Confederate strength resulting from the renewed assertion of state rights. But Davis and Lee seem always to have agreed, a fact of credit to both men.

Davis was a born controversialist. He could seldom resist the temptation to set the other fellow aright. He enjoyed a controversy though he might not like the subject. During the struggle over slavery, in the Civil War, in his old age, he stood close to the front in the war of words. The correspondence between Davis and Winfield Scott is a controversial classic. It lasted for more than a year, ranging over the field of American history from the War of 1812 through the Indian campaigns and the Mexican War; weighty matters of international law and governmental practice were involved. It all began about a claim of Scott for travel pay from New York to Washington. It stopped suddenly with Davis accusing Scott of "falsehood", "malignity and depravity", while Scott seemed content to declare Davis, his superior in the War Department, "an enraged imbecile", guilty of "tergiversation and chicanery". The honors of this combat certainly belong to Scott. Clearly both men were exhilarated by it. And yet these papers all together do not strengthen one's impression of this quality in Davis, rather it sinks into the background and the power and statesmanship of the man are brought out in stronger relief.

The postwar papers leave a painful impression of Davis's imprisonment without trial from 1865 to 1867, of unsuccessful struggles to start a business which would support his family, of pathetic disagreements when the grey old Confederate generals began to arrange their records for history. Until he died Davis was frequently the subject of misrepresentation and obloquy which he seldom failed to resent vigorously in speech and in print. It is diverting to read the letters of the four decrepit old classmates who urge Davis to be moderate in his attacks upon his persecutors, to pay no attention to them. He fought fairly. Read his answer to a request by an editor for a criticism of Grant's military career when the latter was fighting and losing his last battle at Mount McGregor:

> Your request . . . cannot be complied with for the following reasons:
> 1. General Grant is dying.
> 2. Though he invaded our country ruthlessly, it was with open hand, and, as far as I know, he abetted neither arson nor pillage, and has, since the war, I believe, shown no malignity to Confederates, either of the military or civil service.
> Therefore, instead of seeking to disturb the quiet of his closing hours, I would, if it were in my power, contribute to the peace of his mind and the comfort of his body.

The closing years were calmer and pleasanter. The task of making a livelihood was less strenuous; in letters to his old friends he "rowed back up the river of the past to the happy

days of the frontier in the West"; he was still criticized and misrepresented but the tide was turning to fairness and he appreciated it, his people overwhelmed him with proofs of affection. Mellowed by fourscore years and wise and kind in counsel, he made his last speech to the young men of Mississippi a fitting close to a tragic public life:

I feel no regret that I stand before you this afternoon a man without a country, for my ambition lies buried in the grave of the Confederacy. There has been consigned not only my ambition but the dogmas upon which that Government was based. The faces I see before me are those of young men; had I not known this I would not have appeared before you. Men in whose hands the destinies of our Southland lie, for love of her I break my silence, to speak to you a few words of respectful admonition. The past is dead; let it bury its dead, its hopes and its aspirations; before you lies the future — a future full of golden promise; a future of expanding national glory, before which all the world shall stand amazed. Let me beseech you to lay aside all rancor, all bitter sectional feeling, and to take your places in the ranks of those who will bring about a consummation devoutly to be wished — a reunited country.

Jefferson Davis, Constitutionalist, His Letters, Papers and Speeches. Collected and edited by Dunbar Rowland, LL.D., Director, Department of Archives and History of the State of Mississippi. Ten volumes. Jackson, Mississippi: Department of Archives and History.