

The Myth of Nathan Bedford Forrest

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Review

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Ashdown, Paul and Caudill, Edward. *The Myth of Nathan Bedford Forrest.* Rowman and Littlefield, \$24.95, hardcover ISBN 742543005

Simple man, complex symbol

Authors contend Forrest represents the unreconstructed South

Nathan Bedford Forrest poses a major challenge to any student of his life. Although his exploits include ample controversy and numerous life-and-death confrontations (on the battlefield and elsewhere), the man himself seems to have been remarkably uninteresting. Displaying little evidence of deep thought or introspection, and hindered by rudimentary education, Forrest left little that subsequent historians, biographers, and hagiographers can utilize to make sense of the man. This paucity, however, has proven no impediment to a robust industry in Forrest studies. **The Myth of Nathan Bedford Forrest** performs a useful service by providing a compendium of the published musings about Forrest and his significance as a symbol of the Confederacy and the white South.

Ashdown and Caudill, who also have written a similar study of John Mosby, do not linger on the details of Forrest's life. They briefly sketch out his rustic frontier youth and his climb to the ranks of the nouveau-riche as a slave trader in antebellum Memphis. As they do throughout the book, the authors underscore the compulsion of most previous students of Forrest to fit the sparse details of his life into more ambitious claims about his character or age. Thus, in the hands of many biographers and novelists, his childhood takes on mythic colorings, and young Nathan becomes emblematic of the instinctual, existential American frontiersman. (Young Andrew Jackson and Davy Crockett have been subjected to similar depictions.) Apparently, most interpreters are keener to trace Forrest's personality, values, and penchant for violence to the frontier rather than to the institution of slavery. In any case, little distinguished this parvenu member of the southern slaveocracy until he became a Confederate cavalry commander in 1861.

Forrest, by all accounts, was an exceptional soldier who combined uncommon personal courage with tactical brilliance. To be selected as Forrest's mount was a sentence of death; evidently more than three dozen horses were shot from under him on the battlefield. Yet despite his valor and repeated success at out-foxing his Union opponents, he alienated a string of commanding officers. Forrest's brash conduct, outspokenness, and sophisticated strategic understanding of the South's predicament distinguished him from much of the Confederate command in the West, and has sustained repeated claims that the Confederate military and political elite displayed crippling shortsightedness in not elevating Forrest to a higher rank. According to some, the Old South aristocracy who led the Confederacy refused to welcome the hickish Forrest into their ranks. To those who suggest that the Confederacy died of democracy, Forrest's defenders respond that it died of aristocratic incompetence.

The signal event in the Forrest saga was the Fort Pillow massacre. Ashdown and Caudill do not try to resolve the contentious debate over Forrest's complicity in the massacre. Instead, they trace the debate over the event from the first press accounts through numerous scholarly and fictional renditions. No interpretation of the capture of the fort adds luster to Forrest's myth; he either lost control of his blood thirsty troops or else ordered the indiscriminate killing of prisoners. But just as white southerners in New Orleans and Colfax, Louisiana, would erect monuments to Reconstruction-era vigilantes who gunned down black Republicans, white southerners were never much troubled by the bloodshed at Fort Pillow. (Indeed, for many, Fort Pillow was probably a triumph of white southern civilization.) Consequently, the meaning of Fort Pillow took on explicitly regional and racial significance; blacks and white northerners viewed the notorious massacre as emblematic of white southern barbarism while white southerners dismissed it as Yankee exaggeration and fabrication.

Along with the events at Fort Pillow, Forrest's role in the postwar Ku Klux Klan has been a virtual Rorschach test for his interpreters. Forrest apologists stress that his involvement was both modest and limited to the early and most benign phase of the vigilante organization's history. Yet other writers have viewed Forrest's participation in the terrorist organization as an extension of the same virulent and violent racism that was manifest in his slave trading and conduct at Fort Pillow. Here again, Ashdown and Caudill offer not a reassessment of Forrest's role as a Klan leader so much as a survey of the spin that various authors have put on it.

The best portions of the book are arguably Chapter Four and Five, which discuss the role and motivations of journalists and the Nashville Agrarians (a cell of reactionary intellectuals at Vanderbilt during the 1920s) in constructing the Forrest myth. The chapter on the Agrarians is an especially interesting study of the (mis)uses of Forrest by ideologues anxious to exploit a symbol.

Less satisfactory is the treatment of the monumental and visual representations of Forrest. Given that Forrest was and is a potent visual symbol, it is disappointing that the semiotics of Forrest statuary receive only cursory analysis. The subject of an uncommonly large number of illustrations, monuments, and markers, Forrest presumably posed a challenge to artists, sculptors, and monument planners. Just how should the mythical Forrest be rendered in marble, bronze, or in a lithograph? Kirk Savage's *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves* demonstrates how much can be gleaned from sophisticated analyses of visual representations of Civil War era icons. At the very least, Ashdown and Caudill might have recounted the planning, construction, and unveiling of at least the significant Forrest monuments.

The Myth of Nathan Bedford Forrest, finally, disappoints in a more serious way. The authors contend that Forrest is a mythic figure who has performed the same functions as those of his counterparts in ancient mythology. I am willing to entertain this notion (although it belies an ahistorical understanding of the uses of the past, memory, and myth). Certainly, there is ample evidence that generations of writers have been more interested in the symbol of Forrest than in the man himself. But because so much of the book is given over to precisés of interpretations of Forrest, Ashdown and Caudill's contribution is often difficult to discern. In the concluding paragraphs of the book they finally make explicit their most important conclusion: Forrest, they contend, has been an icon for reactionary white southerners who hate the North and the modernity that they trace to it. This claim, on its face, is compelling. But if Forrest is the face of the unreconstructed South, then the authors could have pruned considerable tangential material from their book. Ashdown and Caudill, for instance, are regrettably ecumenical in their treatment of fictional representations of Forrest. In addition to the writings of William Faulkner and Shelby Foote, readers must contend with descriptions of third-rate novelists whose work doesn't hold the interest of readers now and isn't likely to in the future. In other words, this book would have been strengthened if the authors had devoted more space to their interpretation and less to summations of the musings of all manner of would-be hagiographers and lesser writers.

The Myth of Nathan Bedford Forrest almost certainly isn't the last word on the mythic Forrest (nor should it be). But it is a useful introduction to the outpouring of writings on Forrest that is graced with ample illustrations and written in a breezy and accessible style.

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