

### John Bell Hood and the Fight for Civil War Memory

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## Review

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**Miller, Brian Craig** *John Bell Hood and the Fight for Civil War Memory*.  
University of Tennessee Press, \$37.95 ISBN 978-1-57233-702-2

### Looking at John Bell Hood in a New Light

John Bell Hood holds an eminent position among the American Civil War's controversial generals. After winning accolades as one of Robert E. Lee's most aggressive subordinates, he was selected in the summer of 1864 to replace Joseph E. Johnston as head of the Confederate forces in front of Atlanta. The results proved disappointing, ranging from a serious reverse at Atlanta, a costly failed attack at Franklin, and outright defeat at Nashville. After war's end, the Lost Cause crowd placed Hood near the top of their list of scapegoats for the Confederacy's defeat. The general's performances in Georgia and Tennessee supplied ample fodder for their attacks and stir lively debates that continue to this day. Was Hood a capable general faced with an impossible assignment and burdened by an unruly cadre of underlings? Or was he simply the wrong man for the job, an amputee with an inappropriate streak of aggressiveness, hell-bent on proving that his manhood had survived his debilitating injuries.

Hood's wounds were indeed severe. At Gettysburg, shell fragments so damaged the general's left arm that the appendage dangled uselessly thereafter in a sling. Less than three months later, at Chickamauga, Hood lost his right leg. Over the years, these injuries have provided grist for speculation about whether the general's lackluster performance in 1864 flowed from his painful disabilities or from the laudanum that he allegedly consumed to dull the pain. Hard proof has never emerged that drugs or alcohol compromised Hood's abilities, although the general's failure to catch John Schofield's Union force at Spring Hill, along with his mishaps at Franklin and Nashville, have been seized upon as persuasive indirect evidence.

Brian Craig Miller's *John Bell Hood and the Fight for Civil War Memory* examines these questions and more. Miller possesses an impressive storehouse of knowledge about southern notions of manhood during the Civil War era and the impact that amputations had on Civil-War era combatants who went under the surgeon's knife. Given his expertise, Miller's selection of Hood as a case study is understandable, and he does a workmanlike job placing the general into the appropriate cultural context.

To this reviewer's disappointment, however, Hood never emerges from the book's pages as a flesh-and-blood person, and Miller's treatment never answers the many questions that have surrounded Hood's generalship. The book is less a biography of Hood and more a vehicle for the author's discussion of his pet areas of scholarly inquiry. Brief vignettes from the general's life disappear in academic discourses about southern culture and the psychological toll of amputations on the victims and on those around them. Just when the focus returns to the general, he is whisked away from view only to reemerge after a rambling digression about southern notions of honor, about amputees in general, or about the evolution of southern perceptions of the war after the fighting had ended. These intellectual rabbit trails are instructive, but they bog down the biographical narrative and impart a distracting pedantic academic tone to the work.

In fairness to Miller, he cautions in his introduction that this is not a book for those seeking to understand Hood's generalship or the details of his battles, and he keeps that promise. Hood's exploits at Gaines Mill, for example, are discussed in two pages, as are his actions at Second Manassas and at Antietam, and his entire tenure with the Army of Northern Virginia through his wounding at Chickamauga takes up less than a chapter. And while the battles of Atlanta, Franklin, and Nashville receive fuller treatment, more elucidating descriptions of those engagements and of Hood's role in them can be found elsewhere.

Miller articulates as his goal the commendable aim of advancing a "new" military history which "pays particular attention to the social and cultural elements of a military career" and focuses on historical memory "as a vital dynamic in understanding how Hood's reputation came to be forged within history" (xxiii). The result, however, is a book in search of a theme. This reader is left with the impression that the author had three books in mind: a short piece about General Hood, focusing on his postwar career; a longer, more thorough examination of the return of the walking wounded to southern society; and an

analysis of the concerted effort after the war to redefine what the conflict had been about and why the South had lost. He waxes passionately and thoughtfully about the latter two topics but adds little to our understanding of the former. Hood seems little more than a foil for Miller's discussion of the broader topics, in which his interest really lies.

The author hits his stride when he delves into southern concepts of manhood and honor. We learn how southerners proved their manhood through hunting, riding, and drinking, and how they affirmed their masculinity by mastering firearms and displaying military prowess. Warming to his topic, Miller devotes an entire chapter to "A Crisis in Manhood? Hood and the Experience of Confederate Amputees," in which he examines case studies of various civil war amputees to illustrate the nuances of their plight and the difficult adjustments their loved ones and society faced in retooling their attitudes toward them. The strongest part of the book – the last two chapters, which cover more than a quarter of the narrative – contain Miller's examination of Hood's postwar career. Eager to pin blame on someone for their humiliating defeat, postwar Confederate apologists settled on Hood as a convenient target. In response, the general penned his inventive version of events, *Advance and Retreat*, in which he defended his actions. Miller's explication of Hood's postwar life in New Orleans and the general's struggle to redeem his reputation and provide for his family contains significant new material and provides a moving climax to the book.

The definitive biography of General Hood is yet to be written. Although Miller's book falls short of that mark – and despite its extended digressions into the generalized world of honor, amputees, and the like – it still deserves a place on the shelf of anyone seeking to understand the American Civil War and Hood's place in it. Judging from his expertise, we can expect to see fine works by Miller in the future on amputees, manhood, and civil war memory; I certainly hope so, as he is a clear writer and tenacious investigator with much to contribute to the study of those topics.

*Gordon C. Rhea is the author of The Battle of the Wilderness: May 5-6, 1864 (LSU Press, 1994); The Battles for Spotsylvania Court House and the Road to Yellow Tavern: May 7 – 12, 1864 (LSU Press, 1994); To the North Anna River: Grant and Lee, May 15 – 25, 1864 (LSU Press, 1997); Cold Harbor: Grant and Lee, May 26 – June 3, 1864 (LSU Press, 2002); Carrying the Flag (Basic Books, 2004); and with Chris E. Heisey, In the Footsteps of Grant and Lee: The Wilderness Through Cold Harbor (LSU Press, 2007).*

