

Gone With the Glory: The Civil War in Cinema

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Review

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Wills, Brian Steel *Gone with the Glory: The Civil War in Cinema*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, \$24.95 hardcover ISBN 9780742545250

The Civil War on the Silver Screen

Brian Steel Wills's new book *Gone with the Glory*, one of just a few on the subject of Civil war movies, is an absolute must for history and film aficionados who have a passion for the hundreds of movies that pitted the Blue against the Gray, sometimes brilliantly and sometimes dreadfully, on the big screen.

Wills strikes just the right balance in this work about movies from the controversial 1915 *The Birth of a Nation to Gods and Generals*, released in 2003. He covers every era of the more than 700 Civil War films and covers them well. Thankfully, however, this is not a heavy academic book overloaded with nuances and footnotes. It is not a typical Hollywood movie book, either, with photos of Jane Russell alongside those of Abraham Lincoln. The book is a delightful mix of both the serious and the commercial and should be of interest to the film and history scholar as well as anyone with a casual interest in films about the war that tore America apart.

Wills takes a new approach to filmography by analyzing Civil War films in intriguing chapters discussing specific subjects, not just grouping films within chronological eras. His incisive chapter on the Confederate raid on the village of St. Albans, Vermont, in 1864, *Confederates Raid Vermont*, describes the raid itself and how it was portrayed in the movie *The Raid* (1954). In a unique chapter entitled *Shiloh's Bloody Harvest*, he discusses the many films tied directly or indirectly just to the battle of Shiloh. In other chapters, Wills examines individual characters from films such as Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) in *The Searchers* (1956), ruminates about the Civil War at sea, analyzes *Glory* (1989) and other films involving African American troops, and discusses films about prisoners of war, such as *Andersonville* (1996).

The West's Civil War features Wills at his best. He not only discusses the actual mythic history of the west and the dozens of films made about its place in Civil War cinema, but connects particular films to real events and real people. As an example, he notes that the movie character Major Dundee, played by Charlton Heston, was based on Union Colonel James H. Carleton. Wills then gives the reader a fine history of Carleton and compares his life to the character in the film.

Wills writes about many of the famous Civil War dramas set in the west, but he also writes about relatively unknown movies. His pages on *Stage to Tucson* (1950), starring Gary Cooper in a film that fared poorly at the box office and is rarely shown on TV, not only describe the movie, but connect it to the history of how stagecoaches were used during the Civil War. This discussion proves particularly illuminating. The book is full of little known Civil War films, such as *Rocky Mountain* (1950), *Revolt at Fort Laramie* (1957), and *Jack McCall Desperado* (1953).

Throughout the book, Wills adds pieces of information about the filming of the movie and the event or personality of the Civil War era that it depicts. He uses this device to show how filmmakers embellish or change history on the silver screen. One of the most famous scenes in *Glory* involves the refusal of an army supply officer to give shoes to black troops. Wills notes that this never happened, but it was a marvelous device for the movie. Welcome to Hollywood! Still Wills could have offered more on how Hollywood has distorted movies about the Civil War, such as the Lincoln films.

Sprinkled throughout the work are marvelous little notes about unusual actors playing unusual roles, such as football legend Joe Namath of the New York Jets starring in the perfectly dreadful *The Last Rebel* (1971), footballers Roman Gabriel and Merlin Olsen in *The Undefeated* (1969) and singer Jewel in *Ride With the Devil* (1999). There are also several references to the Civil War films of Ronald Reagan, such as *Santa Fe Trail* (1940) and *The Last Outpost* (1951). The actor knew a thing or two about politics, as well.

This fine work is not without its flaws. Wills often writes a fascinating and comprehensive description of the film and neglects the true history of the event or, alternatively, offers a marvelous analytical description of the true history and neglects the film. For example, in a chapter devoted to films about Abraham Lincoln, he writes about the movies that depict the life of the sixteenth President,

but never gives the reader any comparisons to the real Lincoln, a resourceful and dynamic leader and a very different man that Hollywood created for posterity.

The book never really delves into the era in which a film is produced and the type of audience it found in those years. There is little connection between the success of *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and the Great Depression and start of World War II or of *Glory* and its premiere in 1989, after the Civil Rights struggle had gained considerable ground for African Americans. His analysis of *The Birth of a Nation* could have benefited from more discussion of the racism of this film and its impact on black-white relations in the twentieth century. Sometimes, too, in his obvious enthusiasm for the subject, Wills gives the reader far too much plot on some films that denies him needed space for analysis.

The book does not have enough material on the hundreds of silent films of the early years, 1903 to 1915, that created the Lost Cause/Southern Belle/Moonlight in Georgia theme that most Civil War movies followed until the 1980s. It was in the silents that Hollywood first realized that not only was the war itself a box office magnet, but so were the ideas of the underdog Confederates and the reunion of the nation.

Wills must have had a last minute inspiration and added a wonderful filmography of more than 100 Civil War films, offering a separate list of actors who starred for the Union and for the Confederacy in movies and, finally, to my own delight, selected his list of the best and worst Civil War movies ever made. The wonderful note here is that he names *The Birth of a Nation* both the best and worst film, for different reasons. He voted Birth number one in the best category for its superb cinematography and placed it first in the worst category for its made up history and racism.

Despite some weaknesses, *Gone with the Glory* is a highly researched and probing work of Civil War films and their place in both Hollywood and American history. And, for readers, whether historians with doctorates or ordinary lovers of film and history with a bucket of buttered popcorn in their hands, it is great fun.

Bruce Chadwick lectures on history and film at Rutgers University in New Jersey. He also teaches writing at New Jersey City University. He is the author of The Reel Civil War: Mythmaking in American Film (2001).