

Sherman's March in Myth and Memory

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Review

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Caudill, Edward and Ashdown, Paul. *Sherman's March in Myth and Memory*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, \$34.95 hardcover ISBN 9780742550278

Analyzing Sherman's March

In *Sherman's March in Myth and Memory*, Edward Caudill and Paul Ashdown explore the myriad ways in which journalists, historians, fiction writers, and filmmakers have understood and assigned meaning to one of the most controversial episodes of the Civil War. The authors, professors of journalism and electronic media, have co-published previous books on the myth and memory of Confederate figures Nathan Bedford Forrest and John Singleton Mosby, and have earned favorable reputations for their expertise in interdisciplinary studies. In this most recent book, the authors focus on General William T. Sherman and the March to Savannah, arguing that this segment "remains the foundation of the Sherman myth." Caudill and Ashdown maintain that although the Carolinas suffered far more destruction Sherman's campaign through Georgia stands out because the general "faced more powerful Confederate forces in Tennessee and Georgia; the idea of abandoning supply and communications lines was radical and untested; and the political atmosphere was far more tenuous before the Georgia campaign than it was after the capture of Savannah" (37).

After providing a biographical sketch of Sherman, one based largely on Lee B. Kennett's *Sherman: A Soldier's Life* (2001) and John F. Marszalek's *Sherman: A Soldier's Passion for Order* (1993), the authors construct a historical narrative of the March to Savannah. Their overview emphasizes Sherman's relationship with the press, and the, primarily Northern, newspaper coverage of the march. During the early stages of the Civil War, Sherman had an adversarial relationship with the press and their confrontations marked the introductory components of the myth and memory surrounding the general's military career. These incidents, including questions about the general's sanity, branded

Sherman as unstable and illustrate an absence of respect for Sherman's military abilities.

According to the authors, the North's perception of Sherman did not improve until after the fall of Atlanta in September 1864, when he "was being cast as a hero, a man of action and wisdom, [although] a bit mysterious in some respects" (45). By the time Savannah fell and the general presented the city to President Abraham Lincoln as a Christmas present, Sherman's victory had become a symbol of the power of the North's modern military-industrial order over the premodern agrarian South. This triumph not only heralded the South's military defeat, but Caudill and Ashdown contend that the conquest served as a type of regional humiliation. Within this context of defeat, the Southern image of Sherman was intensely critical. Lost Cause exegetes charged that Sherman had violated the rules of war while conducting his campaign and had exacted an epic degree of destruction on Atlanta and all along his trek to Savannah. Ultimately, the authors conclude, "no national consensus of Sherman ever emerged from the press and popular opinion . . . It was never an issue of what he accomplished, but only the meaning of his deeds" (62).

The authors devote some time to the major historiographical debates concerning Sherman's March. In particular, they review the discussion among professional historians regarding Sherman and the idea of total war. Their interest, however, seems to be limited to the notion that "Sherman's words were more severe than actual events" (78). Caudill and Ashdown repeat this contention when they move to an examination of the general, the march, and Civil War fiction. To a certain degree, the disparity between Sherman's rhetoric and his actions allowed him to be "demonized" in prose and his deeds to be amplified and exaggerated.

Aside from Civil War fiction, Sherman and the march have appeared as themes or metaphors in murder mysteries, fantasy literature, and science fiction. Although these works do little to improve our understanding of Sherman and the march, such efforts testify to the endurance and malleability of the general and his actions. Indeed, as Caudill and Ashdown show, the march has even been used as a type of parable for commentary on such things as the Iraq War and Hurricane Katrina.

For those readers looking for a convenient summary of "Sherman studies," this book is a valuable resource. The breath of coverage—history, literature,

poetry, song, stage, and screen—is extremely impressive. Most importantly, *Sherman's March in Myth and Memory* should inspire all students of the Civil War, young as well as old, to take yet another look at the famed general and his historic campaign through Georgia and the Carolinas.

Glenn Robins, Associate Professor of History at Georgia Southwestern State University, is the author of The Bishop of the Old South: The Ministry and Civil War Legacy of Leonidas Polk (Mercer University Press, 2006).