

The Battle of the Wilderness in Myth and Memory: Reconsidering Virginia's Most Notorious Civil War Battlefield

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Review

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Being “lost in the Wilderness” is an existential experience as old as the Bible, and therefore it’s no surprise that no Civil War landscape has more metaphoric power than Virginia’s Wilderness. The 1864 battlefield offers a unique Civil War twist that writers have taken advantage of since they started writing narratives about the battle. But aside from Stephen Cushman’s 1999 *Bloody Promenade*, no writer has examined the mythic power of the Wilderness as a thing unto itself. Adam H. Petty’s systematic study, *The Battle of the Wilderness in Myth and Memory*, casts light into that dark foliage and, in doing so, explains why the Wilderness has such power over our imaginations.

Magicians who show how their tricks work must necessarily take the magic out the trick. Petty, to his credit, avoids this, showing how the Wilderness worked—and continues to work—its own magic while still allowing the Wilderness be wild. “[M]any of the claims of exceptionalism were unfounded, despite their wide-ranging influence in the annals of the war,” Petty explains (xv), but in doing so, reminds us that we don’t have to be awed by what we imagine because the real thing is awesome enough on its own—a lesson we often apply to “marble men” but so often forget can apply elsewhere.

Petty talks of a “Wilderness myth” that grew from “the need to make sense of the 1864 battle....” It told “the epic tale of a terrible battle between the two great generals of the war in a malevolent landscape...” which not only made “a great story,” but it “provided different constituencies with reasons to embrace and perpetuate it” (xv). Petty divides his book into five parts, each of which tackles one of the major components of the Wilderness myth as he defines it: the origin and nature of the Wilderness; the belief that the Battle of the Wilderness as a unique engagement because of the environment in which it was fought; the mystique surrounding the Wilderness; the belief that the Confederates held an edge in the Wilderness; the belief Federals

sought to avoid fighting in the Wilderness at the outset of the Overland Campaign, while Lee sought out a fight there.

The foundations of these myths trace primarily back to *New York Times* correspondent William Swinton, writing only days after the 1864 battle and later in his 1866 *Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac*. Swinton's interpretation "perpetuated the Wilderness myth to the present day" (xii). Petty first tackles characterizations of the Wilderness, which have remained remarkably consistent for more than a century and a half. The Wilderness impressed soldiers with its magnitude and size. "The interminable-forest portrayal reveals the Wilderness's ability to awe those who entered the region with its vastness and monotony," Petty concedes (8). He goes on to argue that modern historians "tend to perpetuate the interminable-forest understanding of the Wilderness," playing up its "vast, unyielding" nature for its dramatic value, in particular, citing "limitations on space in their narratives" as the culprit for a less-nuanced picture (9, 11). Petty argues that a "patchwork interpretation" is more accurate—one that takes into account the varying topography, the boggy lowlands around some of the streams, the small open fields around some of the sustenance farms, and other factors, all of which he expertly documents. "Although to some degree it robs the Wilderness of its menacing character, what it takes away in feeling it returns in information," he says (9).

It's unfortunate that he has to set up a straw man in order to make this approach, though. When he contends "the landscape was more complex than what postwar writers presented," he gives some of those writers less credit than they deserve (22). While he's correct in arguing that most accounts of the Wilderness do, indeed, focus on the "dark, close wood" and "region of gloom" and countless other pithy, grim characterizations because of their dramatic—perhaps melodramatic—power, most serious studies of the battle recount other aspects of the Wilderness. One can't adequately discuss the battle without talking about the fighting around the Higgerson, Chewning, and Tapp farmsteads, the open expanse around Gouverneur Warren's headquarters at Ellwood, the observational advantages offered by the elevation of the Chewning farm, and the bogs around Wilderness Run. Perhaps this is just a matter of making a distinction between writers who touch on the Wilderness in passing and those who write about it in-depth, but Petty doesn't make that distinction—important where he's making the argument that writers weren't making enough distinction. (For examples of writers who differentiate in their descriptions of the Wilderness, see Morris Schaff's overview of the region [*The Battle of the Wilderness*, 1910,

beginning on pg. 57]; Noah Trudeau's account of the fight in Saunder's field [*Bloody Roads South*, 1989, beginning on pg. 53]; Gordon Rhea's treatment of Wadsworth's division on the afternoon of May 5 [*The Battle of the Wilderness*, 1994, beginning on pg. 157] among others.)

However, there is some excellent work in the chapter that explains how the Wilderness became so wild, going well beyond the usual explanation of deforestation caused by mining operations. The creation of the Orange Plank Road, for instance, created a demand for lumber, harvested from the roadside itself, which then made the corridor of woods along the road a particularly heavy second-growth corridor. Petty considers other factors, too, such as the impact of tobacco farming on soil quality.

Another facet of the Wilderness myth is that it was unique in its character because of its dense foliage. Fires that broke out added another distinctive touch. Petty compares those facets of battle to similar engagements at Chancellorsville (also in the Wilderness but in a different part of it) and Chickamauga. The comparisons prove instructive. "The Battle of the Wilderness was not so much a unique engagement as just one manifestation of the tactical problems that Civil War armies faced when operating in a forested region," Petty concludes (46). He could have strengthened this already strong section by including more perspectives from the Confederate First Corps, elements of which fought at all three engagements and thus could have provided some consistent context.

Petty's strongest work comes in the third section, which traces the evolution of the Wilderness mystique over time. It started out as "a forest like any other," he says, but then, "Over time, the region developed a reputation as a malevolent landscape, a process that culminated in the war's aftermath" (71, 50). He traces that evolution from the battle of Chancellorsville, where "many, if not most, soldiers failed to recognize the Wilderness as a distinct place," to the Mine Run campaign, where "an increasing number of soldiers began to recognize [it] as a special and seemingly hostile environment," to battle of the Wilderness, where soldiers on both sides "continued to marvel at how fittingly it was named." Descriptions took "a serious negative turn"—a trend that continued into the postwar years as memoirists "increasingly portrayed [the Wilderness] as a woebegone, gloomy, malevolent labyrinth of a forest" (50, 71).

The fires that broke out during fighting have long stood out as a distinctive feature of the battle, although fires did break out during other fights. Postwar memoirs really solidified these fires as an integral part of the Wilderness's character, though. "[M]emoirs often focused on the

fires as the culmination of the horror that was fighting in the Wilderness,” Petty says. “Yet their descriptions achieved new levels of hyperbole by comparing combat in the flames to a battle in hell” (68). And from a fight in hell, it’s of course just a small jump to think of the region as “a haunt of ghosts and spirits,” ungrounding the landscape into the realm of supernatural (69).

In debunking the myth that Confederates held an edge in the Wilderness, Petty spends a good deal of time building on the work of Earl Hess, who argued that the Wilderness “played not favorites, frustrating both sides.” Petty takes it a step farther, though. He agrees that the Wilderness didn’t give Confederates a unique edge, but he does argue convincingly that Confederates were more effective in taking advantage of the Wilderness to give themselves opportunities. As examples, he explores the attacks against both Federal flanks on May 6. While the Wilderness ultimately played a role in dampening the effectiveness of both, he says, “one should not lose sight of what the Confederate flank attacks did achieve with so little force in such a difficult environment” (102).

Petty also blames Federal for being too strung out on the march, and thus poorly positioned, for their problems deploying in the Wilderness, discounting some of the traditional wisdom that the Wilderness worked against the greater Federal numbers. His breakdown gave me much to consider, although I think he discounted lackluster Federal leadership at the corps level more than he should have. He does rightly cite them for not being bold enough but doesn’t take it much further than that (102).

Structured like traditional term papers—introduction, body, conclusion (here’s what I’m going to tell you, now I’m telling you, here’s what I just told you—the chapters feel a little internally repetitious. This is pretty standard for an academic piece, but some editorial guidance might have helped make the writing a little more accessible. The book could have also benefitted from a more detailed, more accurate map placed in a more convenient spot in the manuscript. Petty spends a good deal of time discussing the road network, so being able to readily reference the map would have been helpful.

That aside, the topic is fascinating, Petty’s scholarship is insightful, and he does a wonderful job weaving together a collection of primary accounts almost as vast as the Wilderness itself. His adroit handling of so much source material is admirable. Petty sometimes misses the forest for the trees, but overall, his book is as complex, nuanced, and worth a visit as

the Wilderness itself. Petty has explored the Wilderness's "menacing character," given us a wealth of information, and still allows the landscape retains its magic and mystique.

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