

Civil War Obscura: Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty

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Feature Essay

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De Forest, John William. *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty*. Original publication, Harper & Brothers, 1867. Reprints, e-artnow, 2021. SOFTCOVER from \$8.60 to \$12.45 and DIGITAL free on Kindle at amazon.com. ISBN 1717280056

There are many literary and intellectual discussions of John William De Forrest's famous novel *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty*. It was one of the first novels to depict war realistically, with blood, gore, illness, and heartbreak. Perhaps due to this lifelike depiction of the Civil War so soon after its ending, it was not a best seller. Since then, however, the book has garnered sterling reviews that note its importance as a "war novel" and compare it favorably with *War and Peace* and *Red Badge of Courage*.

De Forest was a captain in the 12th Connecticut Regimental Volunteers. He participated in the battle of Georgia Landing and the siege of Port Hudson. He also took part in Sheridan's Shenandoah Valley campaign in 1864. His personal experience provided the backdrop for *Miss Ravenel's Conversion*. De Forest develops two distinct storylines: the love story belonging to the sentimental romance convention of ladies who make ill-advised marriages and the story concerning the moral ambiguity of men at war.

Tackling romance first—lovely Miss Lillie Ravenel marries handsome Colonel Carter, a West Point graduate and regular Army officer who is also a rake. He drinks too much, keeps a woman "on the side," and becomes involved in a money-making scheme using his budget as Quartermaster. After his wedding, Col. Carter promises to walk a narrower path but cannot resist the temptations of the dark-haired Madame Larue. Larue is an acquaintance of Lillie's father, Doctor Ravenel, and a southern sympathizer. Lillie's marriage is headed for rocky ground until death intervenes, and Col. Carter falls in battle just before all his schemes are exposed. Lillie is brokenhearted and ready to forgive all, as she is now a mother. Another friend of everyone is heroic and noble (but never promoted!) Captain Edward Colburne. This young man is also handsome and of northern extraction. His plans to become a lawyer are put on hold by

volunteering for a fictional infantry company. He hangs on long enough to end up with Lillie by the end of the book. The war has turned out well for them both.

The second story is more engaging. De Forest depicts the battles of Georgia Landing and the siege of Port Hudson from his own experiences. He continues the stories of the battles of Fort Winthrop and Cane River from oral accounts and newspaper reports. His combat is never sanitized, and his battle descriptions seem as real as any personal account. The variety of soldiers—cowards, liars, and go-getters—gives the reader a chance to see real men under circumstances that cloud judgment and morality.

The title of the book may be misleading. Nowhere does De Forest discuss any actual conversions from one thing to another. Instead, personal loss, the fragmentation of society, and an increased ability to make fluid moral judgments in a time of war account for the book's finale, wherein Lillie Ravenel-Carter marries Captain Colburne. Everyone, including Madame Larue, makes the best of what the Civil War has left them with.

All this is well and good, but the best part of the book is the magnificent array of Easter eggs! Sprinkled throughout the manuscript are asides concerning New Orleans, General Ben Butler, Washington politics, officer promotions, slaveholders, and just enough use of slang to make today's reader laugh out loud on many occasions. Names of places, people, and battles are changed to further fictionalize the story, but figuring out where, who, and what is easy and much fun. Civil War geeks will have a wonderful time trying to outdo each other in expertise, never realizing that John William De Forest's novel is considered the first of its kind to break the war novel's conventional genre of knightly heroes, false bravery and sanitized combat.

De Forest wrote several other well-reviewed books, but historically, *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* is the most important. Any reader who values the evolution of fictional depictions of war should probably own a copy of this excellent book. Some of it is dated, but the battle scenes and comments about Civil War life and politics—the Easter eggs—make it worth at least one read.

Meg Groeling received her Master's degree in Military History, with a Civil War emphasis, in 2016, from American Public University. Savas Beatie published her first book, The Aftermath of Battle: The Burial of the Civil War Dead, in the fall of 2015, and she has written First Fallen: The Life of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, which Savas Beatie also publishes. In addition, she is a regular contributor to the blog Emerging Civil War. She and her husband live with three cats in a 1927 California bungalow covered with roses on the outside and books.