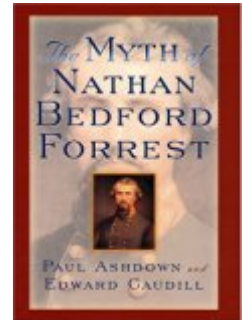


Paul Ashdown, Edward Caudill. *The Myth of Nathan Bedford Forrest.* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005. xxii + 218 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7425-4300-3.



Reviewed by Harry Laver

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Nathan Bedford Forrest, one of the most popular personalities among a star-studded Civil War cast, is also one of the war's most mythologized figures. In their latest contribution to Rowman and Littlefield's American Crisis Series, Paul Ashdown and Edward Caudill—following on the heels of their earlier work, *The Mosby Myth: A Confederate Hero in Life and Legend* (2001)—attempt to explain the myth of Forrest, if not the man himself. The authors chronicle the durability of Forrest's image in its many iterations from wartime hero or villain to early twenty-first-century icon or thug. Their synopses of Forrest's appearances in historiography, literature, movies, even comic books, is impressive. Their analyses of just what his frequent reappearance in American culture means, however, is frustratingly less satisfying.

After defining "myth" as stories and memories that are transferred through a variety of mediums such as folklore, biographies, iconography, and the like, Ashdown and Caudill suggest three ways in which Forrest has become a mythological figure. First, Forrest is an ideal champion of the "if only" school of Confederate memory. The "Wizard

of the Saddle," the unschooled military genius, might well have defeated the Northern invaders if only Southern leaders had recognized his abilities, if only they had provided him with sufficient resources, if only they had granted him the license to take the war to the Yankees on a grand scale, if only, if only.... Second, Forrest has become an icon of the hard-nosed brand of American manhood. This son of the frontier overcame his coarse beginnings to attain a considerable degree of wealth and social standing, a frontier Horatio Alger, one might say. The rough edges remained throughout his life, however, as he never hesitated to charge whatever enemy might be at hand. Finally, in some quarters, Forrest's reputation as a military tactician has achieved mythical proportions. Acclaimed by many of his Confederate contemporaries (with Braxton Bragg the most notable exception) and shown bitter respect by his opponents, Forrest had moments of tactical brilliance such as at the battle of Brice's Crossroads in Mississippi.

For readers unfamiliar with the contours of Forrest's life, the authors draw on secondary

works to outline the essentials, paying particular attention to his role at Fort Pillow and his participation in the Ku Klux Klan. Concerning Fort Pillow and the slaughter of surrendering African-American soldiers, Ashdown and Caudill point out that extant evidence is insufficient to convict or acquit Forrest of direct responsibility. Commenting on his activities with the Klan, they note that throughout his life Forrest maintained the Klan was organized to counter Carpetbagger atrocities and that he resigned when it turned to retribution. Ashdown and Caudill decline to offer an assessment of these and other events in Forrest's life.

The book's principal offering is a chronicle of Forrest's posthumous life as a mythical figure. Postwar press interpretations of Forrest never strayed far from their regional prejudices. Northern newspapers condemned his slavetrading and brutality as both military and Klan leader, while editors in the former Confederacy celebrated Forrest's sense of honor and application of rustic genius in defense of southern civilization and folkways. The authors follow the ebb and flow of Forrest's press image into the late twentieth century, but unfortunately they tell us little of what to make of these recurrent newspaper appearances. An intriguing chapter recounts the use of Forrest's image by the Agrarians, a group of southern literary intellectuals, who, in the 1920s, determined to defend their South against northern critics. Andrew Lytle's biography of Forrest (*Bedford Forrest and His Critter Company*, 1931) exemplifies how the Agrarians' employed the cavalry general as the South's everyman, blessed with native intellect if not formal education, heroic if unrefined. Bedford Forrest's appearances in other medium is also well documented by the authors, from Thomas Dixon Jr.'s *The Klansman* (1905) to John Grisham's *The Summons* (2002), from Christian inspirational fiction to counterfactual histories, from polished bronze monuments to tacky fiberglass "yard art."

The Myth of Nathan Bedford Forrest presents a good, if not in fact comprehensive, accounting of Forrest's various reincarnations as a mythical figure in American culture for nearly a century and a half. The authors' compilation of the general's assorted roles as a literary character is quite impressive. Nevertheless, what is one to make of so many Forrests? In addition to the three mythical versions of Forrest noted above, Ashdown and Caudill put forward that in creating the Forrest myth Americans have also written "a story about the fall and redemption of the darker side of the American dream" (p. xx). In addition, the authors suggest "Forrest represents the fundamental American inclination to protest" (p. xx). Intriguing proposals indeed, but unfortunately these ideas are not pursued with elaboration or analysis. The book leaves no doubt that a Forrest myth has thrived for decades and will continue to do so, but that myth's significance for our interpretation of Forrest, for our understanding of the people who created the myth, and for what that myth can tell us about the society that produced it, is left implicit. Readers must come prepared to draw their own conclusions as the authors offer none.

Newcomers to the study of Forrest will be better served by traditional biographies such as Jack Hurst's *Nathan Bedford Forrest* (1993) or Brian Steel Wills's *The Confederacy's Greatest Cavalryman* (1998). Long-time Forrest fans will find Ashdown and Caudill's survey of their hero's various post-life careers intriguing, but they should not look for new insights on the private or military Forrest. This book will appeal most to those interested in the relatively new study of community memory and memorialization, but they too will likely be disappointed in the book's lack of analysis. Forrest, in myth as in life, continues to surprise and befuddle his most ardent pursuers.

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