



Brian Craig Miller. *John Bell Hood and the Fight for Civil War Memory*. The Western Theater in the Civil War Series. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2010. 317 pp. \$37.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57233-702-2.

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## The Life, Death, and Legacy of John Bell Hood

As the sesquicentennial of the American Civil War officially kicks off this April, readers will notice a rising tide of published work on the major figures of the war. Already a wave of biographies are hitting the shelves, awaiting Civil War buffs to soak them up. But biographers often fall into two groups. There are those who lionize their subjects and those who criticize them. However, Brian Craig Miller is one of the few biographers who is willing to balance conflicting perspectives in favor of putting his subject in the social and culture context of the world he lived in. This approach provides a window into the life of John Bell Hood that other historians were unwilling or unable to open. Instead of fixating on what role Hood may or may not have played in the final military campaigns of the war, Miller seeks to understand how Hood's reputation was forged during the war and well into the postwar era. The strength of this biography is Miller's willingness to view both adulation and condemnation of Hood as part of a struggle for memory. Suppressing the urge to either defend or condemn Hood allows Miller to tell not only Hood's story, but also the story of men like Hood who experienced the Civil War as soldiers, amputees, and defeated warriors of a lost cause.

The details of Hood's early life are so scarce that the society in which he lived is perhaps the best evidence of his transition from boyhood to manhood. Miller uses the current scholarship on Hood's native state of Kentucky to create the backdrop for Hood's life. Hood's father was a doctor and slaveholder of considerable means by Kentucky standards. Hood also benefited from an uncle with political influence, which led to Hood's successful application to West Point. Although there are not many other indications of what Hood's youth was like, Miller provides a reasonable assessment of the concepts of "masculinity" and "manhood" that no doubt shaped Hood's development. Steeped in a culture of physical

competition, gambling, drinking, and hunting, Hood's choice to enter the military makes perfect sense. The life that Miller describes explains how Hood would forge a rigid idea of manhood that would influence his later life. Hood's service on Texas frontier during the 1850s further inculcated the concepts of "self-sacrifice" and "duty." Miller demonstrates that Hood's experience was similar to many other young officers, some of whom Hood would serve with or against during the Civil War. Less clear is Hood's decision to join the Confederacy, which may be linked to his relationship with General Robert E. Lee and other Southern officers. Miller leaves these sorts of conclusions to the reader, but it is clear that Hood's military service led him to adopt Texas as his home state and leave the conflicted border state of Kentucky behind for the Confederacy.

The most unique aspect of this book is Miller's handling of Hood's military career during the Civil War. Hood's charismatic and dynamic leadership in the Texas Brigade led to a promotion to brigadier general, command of the brigade, and eventually won him the approbation of Lee. It would be easy enough to simply recount Hood's military achievements by sorting through the Official Records and pulling out some apt quotes, but Miller's analysis of Hood's wartime exploits goes further. Descriptions of Hood's performance at the battles of Gaines Mill and Second Manassas are interspersed with the reactions and experiences of the men who served with Hood. As biographies tend to be "top down," Miller includes a very effective "bottom up" approach by using first person accounts to provide a nuanced picture of the battles and campaigns Hood engaged in.

This attention to the experiences of other soldiers of various ranks is particularly useful when studying the wounds that Hood suffered. Hood lost use of his left arm at Gettysburg in 1863 and at Chickamauga he received a devastating wound to his right leg, resulting in

amputation. Although Hood's situation was unique for a field officer, he was one of thousands of Confederate soldiers who grappled with the implications of debilitating wounds in a society that valued manhood and mastery. Hood, like many other amputees, was dependent on women for care and companionship during his recovery. Miller's analysis of gender is particularly useful here. Hood's dalliance with Richmond socialite Sally Preston ended in disappointment, but in turn Preston faced criticism for spurning Hood. Even during the war, Confederate leaders implored citizens to respect and even reverence wounded soldiers who had given not their lives, but their limbs for the cause. It was second nature to mourn the glorious Confederate dead, but men like Hood were constant reminders of sacrifice and loss.

Miller deals with Hood's command of the Army of Tennessee with similar evenhandedness. Although other historians were quick to condemn Hood, including repeating claims that Hood's judgment was affected by alcohol and drug abuse, Miller presents the entire story of Hood's role in the fighting around Atlanta and the campaign into Tennessee. Miller found no convincing evidence that Hood was impaired during his command of the army. Instead, the fate of the Confederate army in the West was undoubtedly tied to the increasingly dire situation the Confederate government faced during the last full year of the war. President Jefferson Davis's controversial removal of General Joseph Johnston from command of the Army of Tennessee put Hood in command of men he did not know well at a time when the odds were against the Confederates. Miller's narrative of events shows that Hood was only doing what he believed to be his duty, pushing the army to fight in what he later called "a forlorn hope." Perhaps historians have made the mistake of assuming that every general expected to defeat the armies before him and single-handedly rise to victory. Hood, it appears, was doing as he always had done. He was performing his duty as a soldier, following orders, and leading his men.

Much of the post-campaign criticism and backseat generalship that came at the end of the war was aimed at creating a memory of the war that would pin Confederate defeat on a few individuals and exonerate the efforts of other Confederate leaders. Miller shows that Hood became the center of former-Confederates' struggle to understand Confederate defeat and create the Lost Cause. Hood's detractors blamed the defeats at Spring Hill and Nashville for the collapse of the Confederate army in the West, while concealing the fact that Union General William Tecumseh Sherman had hastened the demise of the Confederacy when he captured Atlanta. During the postwar years, the Southern Historical So-

ciety's basis shifted from Hood's New Orleans to Richmond, Virginia. As Jubal Early and other Virginians came to dominate the society, Hood's role in early campaigns was downplayed and his actions at the head of the Army of Tennessee were overemphasized. Hood was largely unsuccessful at reversing these attempts to blame him for Confederate defeat, although he staunchly denied full responsibility. Miller's detailed account of the heated exchange between Hood, Johnston, and their respective allies offers an intriguing demonstration of the creation of postwar memory.

Even after Hood, his wife, and eldest daughter died in the yellow fever epidemic of 1879, Hood's legacy remained intermingled with Confederate defeat. Although the obituaries and eulogies tended to be gracious, those individuals who remembered Hood's military career felt the need to explain away the loss of Atlanta and the disappointment of the Tennessee Campaign. In spite of Hood's role as the scapegoat of the Confederacy, veterans and civilians alike raised money to provide for Hood's ten remaining children. Indeed, the veterans of the Texas Brigade stepped forward to raise funds and provide for Hood's orphaned children, all of whom eventually found suitable homes. Miller presents a complex view of how Hood was memorialized. On the one hand, Lost Cause writers blamed Hood for Confederate defeat, while on the other hand Hood's continued dedication to the welfare of wounded Confederate veterans and his former soldiers stood as a living monument to his successes.

Miller's biography of Hood provides a useful model for examining the lives of controversial historical figures in a way that rises above the need to assign blame for military events or explain the course of history. Professional historians will appreciate Miller's ability to deftly weave together several threads of historiography to recreate the fabric of the world Hood lived in. Those interested in a straightforward narrative or an extensive analysis of military strategy will be disappointed. But historians who are looking for some new material to liven up their Civil War course will be fascinated by the level of detail Miller provides on everything from camp life in the Texas Brigade to amputation. The only problem with this book is the title. The last half of the book deals with memory, but the first several chapters use the concepts of "manhood" and "honor" to explain Hood's motivations. Perhaps a better title would have been "John Bell Hood, Confederate Manhood, and the Fight for Civil War Memory." Regardless, this book provides a unique blend of social and cultural history that will offer a refreshing alternative to the military narratives that publishers will continue to print over the next five years.

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