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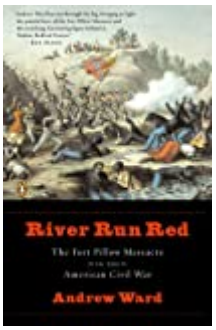

Andrew Ward. *River Run Red: The Fort Pillow Massacre in the American Civil War.* New York: Penguin Books, 2005. ix + 531 pp. $18.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-14-303786-6.

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Military Significance or Postwar Symbolism?

In the aftermath of the Civil War and during the early twentieth century, Americans embraced reconciliation in an effort to reunite a war-torn nation. Eager to forget the harsh realties of the four-year conflict, Northerners and Southerners developed a sanitized interpretation of the events of 1861 to 1865. Union and Confederate veterans from around the nation gathered for reunions and reminiscences, drawing attention to their heroic deeds as soldiers. Consequently, the causes of secession and Civil War were quickly glossed over as men from both sides heralded their gallant efforts. This is not to say that animosity was absent in the post-Civil War society; not every battlefield saw aging veterans shaking hands over a stone wall, nor did the veterans remembered every engagement the same way. Such is the case with the April 12, 1864 "Massacre" of Fort Pillow.

There has been a plethora of works written on nearly every significant Civil War battle, but little scholarly attention has been devoted to the events at Fort Pillow. Andrew Ward's *River Run Red: The Fort Pillow Massacre in the American Civil War* fills this gap in the scholarship. Several significant works exist on the battle's key commanding figure, General Nathan Bedford Forrest, including John Allan Wyeth's *That Devil Forrest: Life of General Nathan Bedford Forrest* (1959) and William F. Currotto's *Wizard of the Saddle* (1996), yet few historians have examined the battle in its own right. Ward's analysis, therefore, is an excellent addition to the historiography.

Ward's narrative starts with a basic premise: Northerners, Southerners, blacks, and whites do not agree on what occurred at the fort. He suggests that the lack of consensus on the events that transpired stemmed from a desire to define the battle either as a "massacre" or as a hard-fought battle that resulted in a Confederate victory. Accordingly, this either/or dichotomy does not provide a complete or factual understanding of the events. Ward concedes that he initially balked at defining the events at Fort Pillow as a "massacre"; however, his overall tone and conclusion of the work suggests just that–Fort Pillow was a massacre.

River Run Red examines Fort Pillow not only within the context of the Civil War, but also within the larger context of antebellum society. For example, the narrative begins with an examination of society in Tennessee,

including the state's initial reluctance to secede from the Union. In addition, Ward provides a comprehensive background of Nathan Bedford Forrest, highlighting Forrest's frontier upbringing, his volatile childhood, and his slave-trading endeavors. Ward explains Forrest's well-known temper as an inevitable consequence of "having to navigate as a free white in a slave society" and his willingness to "protect his own place in society by keeping slaves in theirs" (p. 24).

The heart of Ward's work is devoted to a traditional narration of the battle. Fort Pillow, named after General Gideon Pillow, was built by Confederate engineers in the early stages of the war. In the spring of 1863 Confederates abandoned the fort after a prolonged gunboat siege. The Union army, particularly General William T. Sherman, deemed the fort to be of little strategic value and subsequently ordered the fort to be abandoned. General Stephen Augustus Hurlbut, commanding Union forces in Memphis, ignored General Sherman's order to abandon the fort. Consequently, on February 8, 1864 Union forces of the 13th Tennessee Cavalry, commanded by William Bradford, "a marginal amateur" warrior, occupied the fort for use as a garrison and recruiting post (p. 74). By the spring of 1864, Bradford's command included approximately 200 cavalrymen and about 300 black artillerists.

At dawn on the morning of April 12, 1864, Forrest and his men attacked the fort and demanded its surrender. Through a series of misunderstandings, Forrest believed that Bradford would not surrender. Flags of truce were then withdrawn and Forrest's men attacked the fort with a fury. The fighting against the black troops was particularly murderous and, according to Ward, continued after Forrest's cavalrymen spared the white soldiers. On the dispute over whether the fighting at Fort Pillow constituted a massacre, Ward concludes that based on the disproportionate number of Union and Confederate casualties, a massacre "certainly did" occur (p. 227). Ward, however, falls short of directly blaming Forrest for any premeditated slaughter. Ward concludes, "despite Northern accusations to the contrary, Forrest may have been more inclined to save blacks than whites" (p. 235). Furthermore, Forrest's background as a slave trader taught him to "value black captives," and he would have regarded the slaughter of the black troops as a "terrible waste of manpower" (p. 235).

The most interesting section of Ward's analysis is an examination of the competing memories of the massacre. For example, the author explains how Fort Pillow became a "special object of Dixie revisionism," because the massacre tarnished Southern efforts to romanticize their war effort and their soldiers (p. 370). In the aftermath of the Civil War, many Southerners claimed that if a massacre occurred, the fault lay not with Forrest, but with Bradford for refusing to surrender when given the opportunity.

River Run Red offers a fresh look at a controversial event; however, Ward's analysis has several weaknesses. For example, he attempts to balance a thematic approach with a traditional chronological framework, which results in a choppy, disconnected narrative that often leads to confusion. Moreover, Ward's incessant reference to Forrest as the "Wizard" is not only anachronistic, but also appears condescending. Contextually, Ward fails to make a convincing case for the overall importance of the tragic events at Fort Pillow. It appears as though the engagement had little significance to either army's military strategies and was more important symbolically, a point that Ward could have further reinforced. Nonetheless, Andrew Ward offers a comprehensive account of the massacre at Fort Pillow, and is an important contribution to the Civil War historiography.