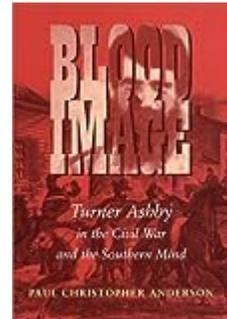




**Paul Christopher Anderson.** *Blood Image: Turner Ashby in the Civil War and the Southern Mind.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002. 258pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2752-0.



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## Confederate Image Building

### *Confederate Image Building*

There is an endless stream of books about the Civil War, and each year we welcome several more to help us better understand the larger themes as well as the minutiae of this great conflict. While the subject of the Civil War has not been exhausted, it seems that some historians have tired of writing traditional political and military histories in favor of analyzing the social and cultural aspects of the war. More specifically, Civil War historians are reexamining individuals and events in the context of historical memory. [1] Paul Christopher Anderson's book *Blood Image* builds on this trend with an examination of the life and legend of Confederate cavalry leader Turner Ashby.

Turner Ashby, a native Virginian, gained renown for his military exploits in the Shenandoah Valley even before the Civil War, and became widely-known and celebrated throughout the region for his achievements during the first year of the war before his death on June 6, 1862. And yet his image in southern popular culture – that of a chivalrous knight on the southern frontier – is one that is fraught with contradictions, namely chivalry

versus savagery, which Anderson contends can be explained by examining the culture in which Ashby came of age and subsequently shaped his character and military career. Moreover, Anderson argues, this image was not one created by Lost Cause writers in the war's aftermath; rather it was an image born of the age. Indeed, Anderson suggests, it was an image that "Turner Ashby himself strove to achieve and maintain" (xi).

Through four chapters, Anderson lays out his argument for the creation of Ashby's "blood image." The first, entitled "Riding a Horse Back Home," explains the importance of horses and horsemanship to the concept of chivalry and of Ashby as the "knight ideal." Anderson goes to great lengths to describe the importance of the horse to the domestic sphere, which he argues is necessarily tied to chivalry, and subsequently the role of a horse in the creation of the chivalrous hero. Speaking of Ashby, he writes "What they saw when they watched the South's finest horseman was the archetype of chivalry" (64). Ashby was certainly a respected horseman, and in the late 1850s, captain of the Mountain Rangers – the Fauquier cavalry that officially became part of Confed-

erate forces in the first year of the war.

In the second chapter, “A Day of Long Knives,” readers come to know Ashby the fearless hero who earned the respect and reverence of those he led. He is presented as one whose leadership was enhanced by his understanding of the natural environment of the Shenandoah Valley and its meaning to those who lived there. If we are to believe romantic accounts of Ashby’s leadership, then he was able to lead and recruit troops by the sheer force of his personality – a personality that Anderson argues was characterized by traits antebellum writers associated with cavaliers and knights of old. Here, readers come to know of Ashby, the partisan soldier, whose preferred mode of killing was with the bowie or “long knife.” The long knife is part of the “blood image” built into his reputation, a reputation first romanticized when Ashby is said to have scared away the enemy by drawing his knife to engage in hand to hand combat, and thus avenge his brother’s death at Kelly’s Island in June 1861.

“The Savagery in Romance” is the third chapter and it is here that readers begin to understand the “blood” in “blood image.” Anderson never really gives readers a clear sense of the killing in which Ashby engaged to defend the Virginia frontier; rather, he seeks to explain how contemporaries were able to soft-pedal what was certainly Ashby’s bloodlust by viewing Yankees as the real savages. Killing men with his bare hands, particularly invading northerners, was, Anderson argues, simply part of the chivalric image with which Ashby had long been associated. In other words, he was simply defending his home – the Shenandoah Valley.

The final chapter, “The Nature of Independence,” continues the analysis of the “blood image” by pointing to the ideal of independence and individuality that Anderson suggests is critical to understanding Ashby’s leadership, in what was regarded as both partisan and guerilla warfare. Simply put, Ashby chose to lead by example. Cavalry troops from the Shenandoah were not professionally trained soldiers and did not respond well to strict discipline. According to Anderson, Ashby understood this and his hands-off leadership style was, in part, what made him successful.

Anderson is to be commended for his effort to understand how a Confederate leader came to be a “hero.” In the cult of the Lost Cause, every Confederate veteran is a hero for having fought to defend the South. It is a status often taken for granted, and in *Blood Image* Anderson

has taken great pains to explain how this ideal developed – at least for one Confederate leader.

Still, readers might find that Anderson’s analysis can also drift into a bit of Lost Cause romanticism. One gets the sense that Anderson admires Ashby, and that his writing style, in fact, contributes to the cavalry leader’s romantic image as “knight of the Valley” (66). In describing Ashby’s death, for example, Anderson writes as though he were authoring a knight’s tale: “Suddenly, the air in front of him split open, and through a serrated vacuum hole came shrieking the strange trebly whirl of a sharpshooter’s ball. He cried out dead and was gone” (67). This is just one of many examples that make the book occasionally read like a romance novel.

Finally, it is worth noting that the author wished to avoid “class, gender, and ethnic analysis in any sustained manner,” even though the subject matter certainly lends itself to such inquiry (xiv). Domesticity, chivalry, slavery, the conflict between professionally trained soldiers and men like Ashby – could all be more fully developed with such analysis, particularly when Anderson’s examination of chivalry and the knight ideal becomes repetitive.

What remains most significant about the book, and where Anderson makes his most important contribution, is in his attempt to explain the genesis of the Confederate-as-romantic-hero mythology that is so prevalent in Lost Cause literature. As Anderson ably argues, that ideal was “not [always] created but rather perpetuated in the Lost Cause” (xiv).

Notes:

[1]. See, for example, Gary Gallagher, *Lee and His Generals in War and Memory* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998); Lesley J. Gordon, *General George E. Pickett in Life and Legend* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); and Carol Reardon, *Pickett’s Charge in History and Memory* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

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