

Contested Meanings: Gadfly' Historian Separates Civil War Fact From Myth

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Review

CONTESTED MEANINGS

'Gadfly' historian separates Civil War fact from myth

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Nolan, Alan T. *Rally, Once Again!: Selected Civil War Writings of Alan T. Nolan*. Madison House, \$29.95 ISBN 945612710

Alan T. Nolan is probably best known for two books, written 30 years apart. The first, *The Iron Brigade*, was published in 1961 and hailed as a model unit history. Three decades later, Nolan wrote *Lee Considered: General Robert E. Lee and Civil War History*, a much more controversial book than his study of the Iron Brigade. *Lee Considered* is a harsh indictment of the famous southern general, contrasting the mythic Lee with what Nolan argues was the actual, and much more flawed, man.

Openly criticizing the Confederacy's best-loved commander has always been risky business, and Nolan instantly earned the ire of many Civil War enthusiasts enamored with the mythic version of the "Lost Cause" Confederacy. One especially irate reader wrote a letter in 1992 to *Civil War News* urging fellow buffs to boycott Nolan's book and any conferences in which he was participating.

Nolan has endured, however, and his new book, "**Rally Once Again!**" is an indication of his continued place in the field of Civil War history as a sort of historians' gadfly: challenging, blunt, and always thought-provoking. This volume showcases his significant contributions to the field, spanning some 40 years, including book reviews, journal articles, forwards, introductions, and book chapters.

"**Rally Once Again!**" is divided into four parts: Leaders, Gettysburg, The Iron Brigade, and Selected Reviews. Most chapters concentrate on either Lee or the Iron Brigade, although there are also extended discussions of Lincoln, the Lost Cause, slavery, and the importance of the Civil War in American history. Throughout each piece, Nolan is remarkably consistent in his approach and

analysis. A lawyer by profession, Nolan values careful research, objectivity, and clear writing.

Whether he is evaluating Lee's generalship, Lincoln's presidency, or the state of Civil War scholarship, he repeatedly reveals his impatience with myth and his faith in historical fact. On page *x* of the introduction, Nolan affirms: "Contrary to the Hollywood and Margaret Mitchell image, I do not see the war as all romantic or glorious. It was in fact a grim and inhumane experience for the Americans involved, although its decisive results -- emancipation and the maintenance of the Union -- were positives. Other, indeed all, of the contentions of the Southern myth of the Lost Cause are also offensive to me and unhistoric.

Nolan expands on these statements in the collection's strongest essay, entitled "Considering *Lee Considered: Robert E. Lee and the Lost Cause*," which was recently published in *New Perspectives on the Civil War*. Here Nolan explains convincingly how and why popular conceptions of the Civil War have become so skewed and romanticized, despite significant strides made by recent historians to emphasize the War's horrors, restore slavery as the prime cause of the conflict, and acknowledge blacks as active participants in the struggle. Nolan's deep frustration is palpable on page 74 when he asserts: "The legend seems to exist 'in our bones' and defeats the efforts of today's historians to set it straight."

A collection such as this has its limitations. There is continuity, perhaps too much so considering the good deal of overlap from chapter to chapter. Nolan repeats the same statements and quotations in many of the pieces, including his view that Lincoln was a complicated man, but an uncomplicated president; Lee's 1864 pronouncement of an offensive grand strategy; Robert Penn Warren's statement that the Civil War is American history; and what Nolan deems as hasty conclusions about the first day of Gettysburg. The decision to include his introductions to other people's books seems a bit odd. These introductions are usually short and appear awkwardly out of context when reading them cut off from the books they originally preceded.

Readers may not always concur with Nolan, but few will find themselves uninterested in what he has to say. Alan Nolan is an historian not to be ignored. **'Rally Once Again!'** is a valuable book recommended to anyone who relishes a stimulating discussion of the Civil War's contested meanings.

Lesley J. Gordon, assistant professor of history at the University of Akron, is the author of General George E. Pickett in Life and Legend (1998) and co-editor of the forthcoming Intimate Strategies: Marriages of the Civil War.