

# Civil War Book Review

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## Feature Essay

David Madden

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Madden, David

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**Wells, Lawrence** *REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS: Rommel and the Rebel*. Yoknapatawpha Press, \$14.95 ISBN 091624265X

Field Marshal Rommel drives on deep into Mississippi with William Faulkner

It is a wonderful convergence of the creative energy of the imagination that two of the most unique novels about the Civil War were written in the same house. In Oxford, Mississippi, William Faulkner wrote *Absalom, Absalom!* at his mother's dining room table, the same table where Larry Wells, author of **Rommel and the Rebel**, dines with his wife, Dean, Faulkner's only niece.

Faulkner's novel is unique in its use of innovative style and technique and in its myriad-minded perspectives on the war's causes and lingering effects. Wells' novel is unique in the imaginative audacity of its conception, realized fully by lucid style, narrative power, and convincing dialogue.

Here's the concept: What if Rommel, while touring southern battlefields by motorcycle, visited Oxford in 1937, just after Faulkner had finished *Absalom, Absalom!*, and used the strategies of Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest later in his desert campaigns during World War II? That's plausible, because a Jackson, Mississippi newspaper reported the fact that such a visit by five unnamed German officers occurred. And what if Rommel's unofficial guide around Shiloh battlefield were William Faulkner? That's plausible fiction.

Faulkner captures Rommel from a genteel party at his mansion, plays tennis with him behind his barn, takes him on a whiskey sipping, wild midnight ride to Shiloh in his rusty Ford. Sitting on a mound above the Tennessee River from which Forrest surveyed the battle, Faulkner narrates and interprets, while Larry Wells juxtaposes his own narration from Forrest's point of view, set off in italics, a technique repeated over fifty pages, one Faulkner himself uses in

Absalom, Absalom! Faulkner's Quentin Compson telling his Canadian roommate at Harvard about the old south comes to mind.

*I'd shoot the cowardly sons of bitches, Bedford muttered under his breath. Officer oughta find the time to set a good example.* Side by side, Rommel and Faulkner stared at the silver band of water flowing powerfully below the high bankà Rommel found it easy to imagine the turbulent wake of the steamboats, men disembarking, skulkers flailing the water, gunboats upstream lobbing an occasional shell into the Rebel camp.*Ich denke, dass ich sie sehe, Rommel saidà.* That's the ticket, said Faulkner.*Forrest slithered down the steep path and mounted his horse. It was clear that he had to organize a night attackà*

Wells nudges the irony of his conception when he has Faulkner ask Rommel, Herr Oberst, will there ever be a more intrepid commander of cavalry?

Later, Faulkner gives the young American translator his opinion of Rommel. It is an astute prediction of the way Rommel's character functions in his Afrika Korps in North Africa against the British five years later.

The character of Rommel's translator is the keel of this well-crafted novel. He travels with Rommel to New York City, Washington, Gettysburg, and Brice's Crossroads, as Rommel experiences American popular culture, and race, gender, and class contrasts, along with history. And it is he, as a soldier, who anticipates and observes Rommel's use, combined with the Desert Fox's own innate military talents, of General Nathan Bedford Forrest's tactics as he learned them in books and on the ground in the Depression Era south.

The 1986 *New York Times* review of *Rommel and the Rebel* declared that the most interesting part of the novel is the fifty-page segment in which Faulkner and Rommel bond. I agree, and so, I expect, will most readers. Faulkner, and Forrest, haunt Rommel throughout the rest of the novel.

As a novelist, I have wondered over the years why this unique novel has not inspired other Civil War novelists to venture more audaciously into the realm of possibilities. Wells, as a first novelist, plunged into that realm and emerged with a unique conception in which Rommel, Faulkner, the young translator and other characters recall, talk about, reflect upon the Civil War in fresh contexts, including World War II as it is progressing. Although Civil War novels have become less and less predictable, it's not too late, of course, for novelists of the

future to follow Wells' daring raid upon the possible.

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*Founding director of the United States Civil War Center, David Madden is author of the Civil War novel Sharpshooter. He is editing a new book called Thomas Wolfe's Civil War and a reprint of Loss of the Sultana and Reminiscences of the Survivors.*