

River Run Red: The Fort Pillow Massacre in the American Civil War

John Cimprich

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Review

Cimprich, John

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Ward, Andrew *River Run Red: The Fort Pillow Massacre in the American Civil War*. Viking, \$29.95 ISBN 670034401

Civil War Atrocity

Nathan B. Forrest raid on Fort Pillow

Andrew Ward is a professional writer whose previous works included *Fits and Starts: The Premature Memoirs of Andrew Ward*; *The Blood Seed: A Novel of India*; *Our Bones Are Scattered: The Cawnpore Massacres in the Indian Mutiny of 1857*; and *Dark Midnight When I Rise: The Story of the Jubilee Singers Who Introduced the World to the Music of Black America*. This background and his writing style shape **River Run Red**.

The book centers upon the Confederate attack on Fort Pillow on April 12, 1864. The fort sat on the Mississippi River north of Memphis. Its garrison of unionist and black Federals became a target of Major General Nathan B. Forrest when he raided western Tennessee and Kentucky. Federal survivors claimed that a massacre followed the fort's fall, but Forrest denied it. It has always ranked as the war's most famous alleged atrocity, and today most studies by professional historians consider it a massacre. Ward's coverage divides into four parts: background of the site and those involved, the incident, the wartime aftermath (including investigations), and the postwar lives of participants. He aids readers' visualization of the story through maps and illustrations. A preface explains his approach to the controversial subject.

Strong points in Ward's analysis include the psychology of those denying guilt, corruption among officers in the first Federal garrison, the poor leadership skills of the unionist Major William Bradford, the shaping factors in Forrest's background, and Forrest's rough management of his own troops. Ward makes a strong case that a massacre resulted when some Confederates' racial hostilities caused a breakdown of discipline and that Forrest knew what happened but

covered it up. The analysis builds from extensive research.

Ward primarily aims the book at the popular audience. He will catch and maintain the interest of many of those readers. Chapters have catchy titles and short length. His passionate writing tells the story using vivid images, a wide vocabulary, and in general very polished phrasing.

Ward's analysis and endnotes indicate that his secondary audience is scholars. They will have more mixed reactions. Not all of his content is documented and some citations are either incorrect or incomplete. Sometimes he deduces too much from documents or misreads them. Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Jackson's report on the incident states that Private Eli Cothel was saved from burial when Confederates saw he was alive, not that he dug himself out. General Stephen A. Hurlbut's order sending reinforcements to Fort Pillow went out at 7:00 p.m. (not a.m.) after, rather than before, receiving news of the battle on April 12. **River Run Red** also contains a number of minor errors. Charles Davis was a captain in the United States Navy, not an admiral. The Federal Army mostly recruited blacks into the infantry, rather than into the artillery. The author should not use unpublished essays and newspaper articles by nonprofessional historians as sources for historical facts and quotations not verifiable elsewhere, nor should he trust an account of the battle by William Witherspoon, a Confederate not present.

Some of the work's analysis is problematic. The *New Era's* canons probably could not be raised high enough to hit the barracks beside Fort Pillow on the bluff. Most significantly, Ward accepts debatable Confederate claims about depredations and drunkenness by the last Federal garrison.

Professional historians should consult Ward's study but do so with caution. Other readers who like great breadth of context and detail--**River Run Red** is twice as long as any other book on the subject--will find it entertaining and enlightening on the major aspects of the incident.

John Cimprich (cimpricj@thomasmore.edu), professor of History at Thomas More College, published Fort Pillow, a Civil War Massacre, and Public Memory with Louisiana State University Press one month after Ward's book appeared.