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The Battle of the Wilderness in Myth and Memory

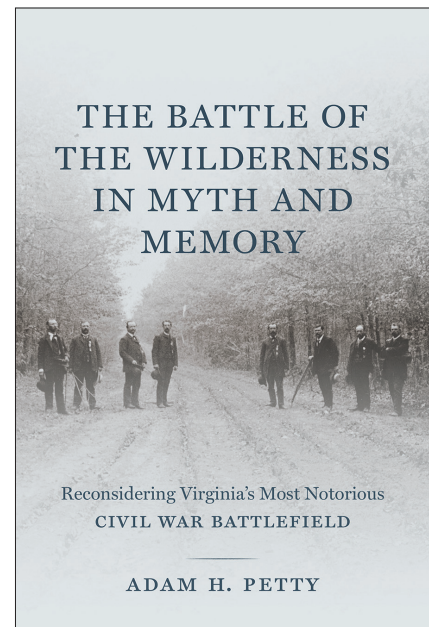
Reconsidering Virginia's Most Notorious Civil War Battlefield

ADAM H. PETTY

In this highly revisionist study, historian Adam H. Petty tracks how veterans and historians of the Civil War created and perpetuated myths about the Wilderness, a forest in Virginia that served as the backdrop for three of the war's most interesting campaigns. This forest had a fearsome reputation among soldiers, especially those from Union armies; many believed it to be an exceptional landscape with a menacing mystique that created favorable combat conditions for Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. According to Petty, the mythology surrounding the campaigns in the Wilderness began to take shape during the war but truly blossomed in the postwar years, continuing into the present. Those myths, he suggests, confounded accurate understandings of how the physical environment influenced combat and military operations. While the Wilderness did create difficult combat conditions, Petty refutes claims that it was unique and favored the Confederates.

Unlike previous studies of the Wilderness, this work does not focus on a single battle or campaign. Instead, Petty explores all the major clashes there—Chancellorsville, Mine Run, and the battle of the Wilderness—which allows Petty to observe changes over time, especially regarding the attitudes and actions of generals and soldiers. Yet Petty's study is not a narrative history of the campaigns. Instead, he reconsiders traditional interpretations surrounding the nature of the Wilderness and how it affected military operations and combat. His work analyzes not only the interaction between military campaigns and environment but also how the memory of that interaction evolved into the myth we know today.

ADAM H. PETTY is a historian and documentary editor for the Joseph Smith Papers.



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