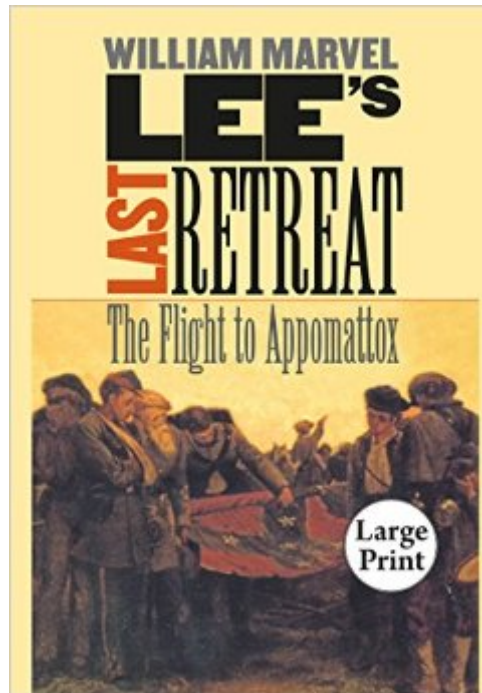


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Lee's Last Retreat: The Flight To Appomattox (Civil War America)



Synopsis

Few events in Civil War history have generated such deliberate mythmaking as the retreat that ended at Appomattox. William Marvel offers the first history of the Appomattox campaign written primarily from contemporary source material, with a skeptical eye toward memoirs published well after the events they purport to describe. Marvel shows that during the final week of the war in Virginia, Lee's troops were more numerous yet far less faithful to their cause than has been suggested. He also proves accounts of the congenial intermingling of the armies at Appomattox to be shamelessly overblown and the renowned exchange of salutes to be apocryphal.

Book Information

Series: Civil War America

Paperback: 328 pages

Publisher: The University of North Carolina Press (February 27, 2006)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0807857033

ISBN-13: 978-0807857038

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 0.7 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.3 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.8 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (15 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #1,721,711 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #95 in [Books > History > Americas > United States > Civil War > Campaigns & Battlefields > Appomattox](#) #17117 in [Books > History > Military > United States](#) #36654 in [Books > History > Americas > United States > State & Local](#)

Customer Reviews

William Marvel is well known for books of Civil War history challenging conventional wisdom, such as his very sympathetic biography of Ambrose Burnside. In "Lee's Last Retreat" Marvel's target is the hazy romanticism of the Lost Cause version of Appomattox wherein a band of peerless heroes gracefully surrender their arms only because they faced with a numberless horde of enemies led by the plodding, remorseless U.S. Grant. Marvel successfully demonstrates, in my opinion, that in fact Lee's army at the start of the affair was much larger than popularly supposed -- more than 70,000 men available to him -- and that Lee's army was plainly outmaneuvered and outmarched over the next week, its morale collapsing disastrously as thousands of soldiers deserted its ranks (Marvel includes an interesting discussion of how the records show that the soldiers of the Army of Northern

Virginia were more likely to desert the closer to their own homes they were). Marvel also devotes substantial space to discussing why Lee fatally delayed for an entire day at Amelia Court House, permitting Grant to catch up to him; the usual claim that Lee was waiting for supplies is rejected in favor of an explanation that the failure to erect a needed pontoon bridge over the Appomattox River was the primary reason. And there is an interesting discussion of the final surrender ceremonies. Our traditional view has been largely shaped by the writings of two remarkable men -- Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain and John B. Gordon, both fine warriors and both men unable to resist romanticizing and expanding their own roles in post-war writings; Marvel's version is that mutual salutes exchanged by the two sides never happened and that Gordon tried desperately in violation of the agreed conditions to avoid making a public surrender.

William Marvel has come under a fair amount of criticism for this book. Mostly he is accused of being anti-southern and attempting to re-write history in a manner that is not flattering to the troops of the Army of Northern Virginia. On the contrary, I found this to be an engaging book that not only does not rip away the luster of courage that is usually bestowed on the common Confederate soldier but actually accentuates it. After nine months in the trenches of Petersburg it is no wonder that Lee's men were beaten down. A late uncle of mine fought in the trenches during WW I and his stories of the trenches made it clear to me just how awful trench warfare is. Finally the tenacious Grant turned Lee's flank at Five Forks and the Confederate Chieftain knew the game was up. Marvel takes up his story with the evacuation of Petersburg and Richmond and tells the story of the miserable conditions faced by both armies in the days that followed. Lee made mistakes and Marvel has the courage to point them out. Still one has to wonder if Lee could have gotten his army to North Carolina even if he had conducted a flawless retreat. As the author points out, the Yankees could smell a final victory and the chance to at last go home. They were therefore much more inclined to accept a lack of rations and forced marches than were the Confederates. A few more days of hardship could send the men in blue home while all the boys in gray could look forward to was a Yankee prison. I really have to wonder if Lee really wanted to make it to North Carolina. Marvel fails here to delve into the talks Lee had held with Secretary of War John C. Breckinridge long before Petersburg fell.

The denouement of the Civil War in the East has been the subject of many volumes from noted historians and battle participants. All seem to paint this episode as some grandiloquent occasion with diplomatic surrender actions from both sides. William Marvel's latest work attempts to refute many of these myths and he indeed does succeed at making this seem like any other Civil War

skirmish with "Lee's Last Retreat: The Flight to Appomattox". Targeting mainly the versions of the Confederate surrender rendered in later post-war years by John B. Gordon and Joshua Chamberlain, Marvel proves that these accounts are largely fictitious and laden with numerous self aggrandizing points. Marvel systematically shows that the Confederate retreat from Petersburg and the subsequent chase by the Union forces was a desperate action bent on consolidating Southern forces in North Carolina and (hopefully) extending the struggle. The final surrender at Appomattox then, under Marvel's pen, is an anti-climactic action by an exhausted army and leader. Using in depth narrative and many first-person accounts and diary/journal entries, Marvel recreates the military atmosphere prevalent during the early April 1865 timeframe when the Confederate rebellion reached its conclusion. The end of the Petersburg siege starts the book and Marvel discusses in detail the actions taken by R.E. Lee's forces to escape from this front and the capital at Richmond to march West towards Amelia Courthouse. Many rearguard battles ensue as the escape route gets very complex with many Confederate divisions and brigades involved. The first myth is dissolved when Marvel refutes the long-held opinion that this escape was essentially doomed by the lack of Confederate provisions at Amelia Courthouse.

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