



Five Forks: Waterloo of the Confederacy

Robert Alexander

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The Battle of Five Forks was one of the the last battles of the American Civil War. A week later, Lee surrendered. Two weeks later, Lincoln was dead. In this meditation on that battle, Alexander juxtaposes the story of the battle, which he tells through narrative, letters, and journal entries, with his own impressions, viewing the South through Northern eyes. In addition, he views contemporary American society through the story of the Civil War and specifically through the story of Five Forks. If it is true that we meet our past coming to us out of the future, then, Alexander posits, America is still grappling with issues unresolved by the Civil War. Those issues are not just the obvious ones of race and class, or of North vs. South, but also the more ephemeral issues surrounding the mythos Americans live by.

Alexander is not a historian, and this is much more a literary work than a battle story. However, the immediacy with which Alexander tells his tale leads the reader to experience Five Forks—the land, the smells, the cries—as if present there in 1865. Thus, he does not just describe a battle; he captures the spirit of all battles, all wars.

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