

## America's Don Quixote: John Newman Edwards's Chivalric Quest for the Lost Cause

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Matthew Christopher Hulbert's *Oracle of Lost Causes: John Newman Edwards and His Never-Ending Civil War* explores the life of John Newman Edwards, a former Confederate major in the Western theater of the Civil War, and follows his postwar career as an adventurer and journalist. Hulbert expertly crafts a narrative that not only elucidates many of the major events that occurred in Missouri during the War but also highlights the role that Edwards later played as a mythmaker of the highest order.

Hulbert argues that Edwards was a man out of time, a Quixote-esque figure obsessed with tales of medieval chivalry and Arthurian legends. It is through this lens that Hulbert explores Edwards's wartime career and his postwar obsession with recreating an imagined new Old South. Edwards was a close friend of Brigadier General Joseph Shelby and served as the adjutant of his famed Iron Brigade. It was, however, the power of his pen that made Edwards famous. Edwards's obsession with Arthurian legend, according to Hulbert, caused him to see Shelby as a powerful figure from the medieval past and endeavor to transcribe his story and transform it into a legend.

Upon the conclusion of the war, Edwards moved to Mexico in a desperate attempt to continue his fight against the Union and his eternal struggle to reestablish a hierarchy akin to that of the Old South and an imagined Old World. It is through his exploration of this period of Edwards's career that Hulbert can more explicitly draw the connection between Edwards's preferred view of society to the aristocratic view of European monarchs. Hulbert demonstrates the affection that Edwards had for the imperial court of Maximilian and Charlotte within Mexico. These figures loom large in the narrative as representative of the Old World figures of which Edwards was enamored. And they factor heavily into Hulbert's depiction of Edwards as a fourteenth-century man in a nineteenth-century world.

Upon returning to the United States during Reconstruction, Edwards continued his prewar career as a journalist in Missouri. According to Hulbert, it was under Edwards's skilled pen that Jesse James and the James-Younger gang became more than just bandits in the hills of Missouri, emerging in the popular imagination as modern-day Robin Hoods who actively made the moral choice of resisting Reconstruction policy the only way they

knew how: through violence. Hulbert's exploration of Edwards's relationship to the James-Younger gang demonstrates the skill that Edwards brought to building a Lost Cause narrative. He worked to produce his own version of the infamous Lost Cause that centered on the Western theater and Missouri. Knowing the majority of the Lost Cause's intellectual production occurred in Virginia, Edwards was determined to ensure that Missouri remained a part of Confederate memory despite its earlier status as a border state.

Despite Hulbert's insistence that Edwards wanted to reestablish an image of the Old South that existed only within his mind and followed his own affection for hierarchies, he does not explore in great detail the appearance of that hierarchy. Hulbert is quick to note that Edwards was a white supremacist who maintained white supremacist views of southern society. However, he does not highlight the implications of this in Edwards's life and writings. It is clear from Hulbert's text that Edwards was a supporter of slavery who worked to remove it from the history of the war. What is less clear is how these elements fit into Edwards's understanding of the hierarchies he supported and the Old World he hoped to reestablish in the New. Hulbert acknowledges Edwards's rage against Reconstruction and its empowerment of formerly enslaved Black southerners but does not highlight how that impacted the racialized nature of Edwards's writing or the importance he put on continued social and racial hierarchy. Further exploration of this point could have enriched the narrative as well as the connections Edwards continued to draw to the medieval past.

Hulbert expands heavily on Edwards's inherent belief in the importance of chivalry and the South's unique honor culture he and other white southerners believed stemmed from its cavalier past. It is this idea that allows Edwards to present the figures he loved, such as Shelby, as men of a higher order more fit to rule the South than the Radical Republicans he so despised. The way Edwards incorporated these gendered beliefs of honor into his daily life is underexplored. Edwards, according to Hulbert, was heavily invested in the idea of dueling to protect honor and being a gracious paternalist to his dependents. But it is difficult to ascertain from the text how, or if, Edwards expressed these ideas through his relationship with his wife Jennie, for instance. Hulbert does acknowledge the reversal of the traditional gender roles apparent in the final few years of Edwards's life, but it is difficult to grasp the nuances of their relationship and Edwards's demonstration of his notions of chivalry toward his wife and children.

Hulbert constructs a compelling narrative that shows Edwards's war career as well as how he grappled with the legacy of the conflict in which he participated. Through his exploration of these ideas and a vast number of sources, ranging from newspapers to private correspondence, Hulbert effectively argues for the importance of Edwards as a figure of both historical and memorial significance. *Oracle of Lost Causes* not only provides an intimate depiction of life on the Civil War borderlands, but through John Newman Edwards it comes into contact with famous outlaws and European royalty. It contributes to the literature on the Lost Cause by complicating and expanding what the Lost Cause is and could be. Matthew Christopher Hulbert effectively demonstrates the importance of biography in telling unique, individualized stories often overlooked in historical discourse. By exploring the life of John Newman Edwards through crisp and effective prose, Hulbert constructs a captivating story that explores a historical period and a man so determined to make it his own.