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Douglas V. Mastriano, *Alvin York: A New Biography of the Hero of the Argonne*. Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2014. Pp. xii, 323. ISBN 978-0-8131-4519-8.

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Wars need heroes to embody the necessary sacrifice and stoicism they entail, otherwise their drama would be too abstract and remote. George Washington crossing the Delaware, Davy Crockett at the Alamo, Abraham Lincoln in the Civil War. Ambiguous wars produce problematic heroes. Dolly Madison, the “greatest generation,” or the “first responders” of 9/11 don’t really make the grade. The First World War left us a mixed legacy, to be sure, but on the battlefield the United States was clearly victorious. Sgt. Alvin York was its chosen hero. He perfectly symbolized the American role in the conflict. Rough-hewn, instinctual, and innocent, compelled to fight by the sheer righteousness of his cause, York embodied all the virtues of a modern Cincinnatus roused to action.

Yet it took nearly six months after the armistice before the *Saturday Evening Post* first publicized York’s exploit in the Meuse-Argonne offensive of September-October 1918, and what an improbable exploit it was. After skirting round a German front line dotted with machine gun nests, supported by half a dozen dough-boys, York personally captured 132 German soldiers, killed six more in a enemy bayonet attack, and overran three of their machine gun positions—with nothing more than an army-issue rifle and a Colt .45 sidearm. Afterward, his brigade commander quipped, “Well, York, I hear you have captured the whole damned German army.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it seemed incredible enough to be a prank or a hoax, but three official investigations, two by the United States and one by Germany, more or less corroborated the story. York had added enemy contingents like falling dominoes to his prisoners on the way back to American lines. He remained a preternaturally calm and self-possessed soldier throughout the chaos of battle on that October day.

The public could not resist the Daniel Boone-cum-Buster Keaton dimensions of Sergeant York’s story. More significant, however, in all the publicity that followed were the man’s personal qualities. He was a skilled Tennessee sharpshooter of Anglo-Saxon stock, a God-fearing Christian and patriot raised in humble Appalachian solitude. Therein lay the key to his heroic deed. The United States in 1919 was on the brink of a decade that celebrated precisely those attributes, because postwar American society emerged so decidedly changed: multiethnic, urban, secular, and now harnessed, it seemed, to the dull routines of industrial production. York represented our earlier, healthier, and simpler past.

In his new biography of “the hero of the Argonne,” Col. Douglas Mastriano, himself a combat veteran, casts aside that larger sociocultural context as part of the “America needed a hero” argument, a “weak hypothesis” (4) put forward by an earlier biographer, David Lee.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Mastriano’s introductory chapter dwells on the shortcomings, as he sees them, of virtually all prior studies of York—“Their authors betray their ignorance of the period” or are too “cynical” and “postmodern” (4, 8). That dismissive tone is regrettable, especially since the author does not hesitate to voice his own openly Christian convictions in regard to the born-again York—“a man walking in grace and freedom” (3), “an example of what one can accomplish in choosing this day to serve the Lord” (8).

Mastriano prefers to set York firmly in a military context; that is to say, he stresses the intrinsically heroic gallantry of York’s exploit, certainly unique in its magnitude and fully worthy of the Congressional Medal of Honor he was awarded. And that is the beginning and the end of the argument for Mastriano. He devotes 150 pages to York’s life through the war (he was thirty in 1918), tacking on just twenty-eight for his remaining forty-five years. Of course, not all years are equal. Still, York involved himself in some interesting

1. David D. Lee, *Sergeant York: An American Hero* (Lexington: U Pr of Kentucky, 1985) 39.

2 See note 1 above.

projects when he returned to the Cumberland Valley after the war, projects designed “to improve the lives of his people”; he also inserted himself into the later debate over American intervention in World War II. He endured serious personal problems in those post-Second World War years when he was beset by various illnesses and impoverished by his well-meaning friends and admirers. Those subjects get short shrift here.

Another flaw of *Alvin York* is the author’s narrow conception of heroism. Heroes exist in the eyes of their beholders. The actor may be inarguably courageous like York—though he himself thought he was only doing his duty—but heroics require something more, an appreciative audience, an amplifying echo that resonates with the public. There were, after all, well over a hundred other winners of the Medal of Honor in the war who got no more than a moment of recognition. As a historian (PhD in history), Mastriano should consider and account for the extraordinary reception of York’s feat by the American public. Nonetheless, in the body of the book, he leads the audience onto different, more limited ground that he investigates with considerable confidence and intensity. Which gets us to the substantial value of the book.

Mastriano literally scoured the terrain where York accomplished his deed. Between 2002 and 2006, he headed up an international team of some fifty members, dubbed the Sergeant York Discovery Expedition (SYDE); it included “historians, geospatial analysts, researchers, archeologists, museum curators, professional military members, family members, ... intelligence analysts, imagery analysts, and small arms weapons [sic] experts” (196). In addition, Mastriano exhausted the relevant military archives in both the United States and Germany, the latter for the first time. The result is the most detailed and persuasive account we may ever have of York’s action, moment by moment, in the Argonne Forest. Mastriano also pinpoints precisely where the action took place, which had been in dispute, although the sites proposed in previous studies fall within some one hundred yards of one another. Why it was “imperative to locate” (191) the exact spot is not made entirely clear, but such painstaking allegiance to specificity burdens a careful reader with eighty-two pages of documentation for 222 pages of text and with York’s supposed mountaineer’s diction, actually larded into York’s “war diary” by its Australian editor, Tom Skeyhill. On the plus side, the book is generously, handsomely as well as helpfully endowed with forty-three photographs and ten maps. It was on the basis of the massive research conducted by the SYDE that a three-mile-long Sergeant York Historic Trail and two monuments were established at Mastriano’s site for the ninetieth anniversary of the event.

All in all, Douglas Mastriano’s investigative zeal makes his *Alvin York* a singular achievement in the small library of York biographies, indeed definitive within its chosen boundaries. It also makes the book more properly a monograph than a biography. David Lee’s slim biography, from the same press, remains the more readable and balanced of the two. Happily, it should be noted, both Mastriano and Lee recall what fearless bravery and authentic heroism of an earlier day look like in our own era of rampant counterfeits forged by the media. Whatever else may be said about Alvin York, he was matchless in his genuinely unassuming integrity and aw-shucks modesty. He “never took pride in the exploit.” “It is one of the things I want to forget,” York said.<sup>3</sup>

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3. Note 1 above, 47.