

Gods and Generals

A
Film
Review

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Gods and Generals: A Film Review

GODS AND GENERALS is not a film for the frivolous moviegoer. If you're in the mood for a fast-paced, action-adventure flick, don't waste your time. If, however, you are looking for a film of substance, your money will be well spent.

Director Ron Maxwell has given us a film with a clearly discernable theme. He deftly sets the stage for this epic story before the first actor's face ever lights the screen. The film begins with a medley of battle flags behind the roll of opening credits, the haunting music of Mary Fahl, and a quote from the controversial literary figure, George Eliot. Through these three artistic devices, unveiled before one word from the script is uttered, Maxwell subtly prepares the viewer for the theme of his film.

By using flags of honor, both North and South, flapping and fluttering behind the opening credits of *Gods and Generals*, Maxwell skillfully sets up his audience to begin thinking about community, duty, and pride of home. Maxwell's Confederacy is not the reviled Old South we have been programmed to look down upon today, but rather the beloved homeland of Lee, Jackson, and all those who fought with them. These men were not fighting to defend slavery, but to defend their homeland. And we are touched, early and often in the film, with palpable reminders that defending our home is something we all would want to do. With the increased talk of war and "homeland security" all around us these days, we can easily relate to Lee and Jackson. At the core, this is what Maxwell's film is about.

In the film's first scene, Robert E. Lee, portrayed by Robert Duvall, is offered the command of Mr. Lincoln's Army of the Potomac.

Lee declines, explaining that his first duty is to defend his home, Virginia. The setting then shifts to Lexington, Virginia, and VMI, where Thomas Jackson, skillfully played by Stephen Lang, is an instructor of young military cadets. Upon receiving a note from Lee, Jackson explains that although he loves the Union, he loves Virginia more. Duty has called.

Jackson is the central figure of *Gods and Generals*. He is portrayed as a devoutly religious man, one who shares Scripture with his wife and comrades, and one who prays openly and often, committing his life into the hands of the Almighty. As the first battle of Manassas is about to commence, Jackson is seen on the battlefield, offering a prayer of commitment. At the conclusion of his prayer, he even slightly lifts both of his hands, implying surrender and praise. In his prayer we see once again the film's theme of home. Flag imagery resurfaces as well. "...it is your banner I will raise against those who will desecrate our land. If it is my time to come, then I will come with all the joy in my heart. Amen."

With these two sentences, we see a glimpse into Jackson's heart and mind and we learn that he, like Lee, is a ready defender of his homeland against the invaders of the North. We also see a man fully convinced of God's Providence. Because of this honest portrayal of Jackson, many Christians are praising this film. And for the same reason, many detractors are critical of it.

The second device, Mary Fahl's ethereal *Going Home* musically juxtaposed against the opening menagerie of colorful pennants and banners, pierces the viewer's soul before the action ever begins. With a melody faintly

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reminiscent of the classic Scottish ballad, *Loch Lomond*, another song about the call of home, Fahl's lyrical narrative foreshadows the hearts of those called to war and those called to remain at home and wait.

Mary Fahl's voice has been touted by some to be an instrument unto itself. Maxwell uses her voice, the amazing violin/fiddle work of Mark O'Connor, the tin whistle and uilleann pipes of Paddy Moloney, and the remarkable musical score by John Frizzell and Randy Edelman to delicately underline the film's scenes and settings. All the music is deeply moving, tugging us toward the love of home and family.

And the tug is seen on both sides of the battlefield. General Jackson is seen longing for home, wistfully reflecting on his beloved wife, Anna, and expressing joy over the news that she is pregnant with their first child. The relationship between these two is central to the movie, helping us to see Jackson not just as a great military leader, but also as a man of flesh and blood, with passion, longing, loneliness, and joy.

Like Jackson, the central figure on the Union side, Colonel Joshua Chamberlain, played by Jeff Daniels reprising his role in the film *Gettysburg*, is also introduced in the classroom. He too is a teacher—a professor at Maine's Bowdoin College. But the scene shifts quickly to his home and an animated dialog with his wife, Fanny (Mira Sorvino). They discuss the merits of war vs. the importance of home and family. As the film progresses, we see Chamberlain contemplative and reflective, and like Jackson, longing for his darling wife. Home is tugging at him as well.

One of the most dramatic scenes in the film takes place in the Virginia town of Fredricksburg. As the Union Army marches across the Rappahannock River on pontoon bridges, residents flee. The Beale family, introduced earlier in the film sending their sons off to war, now must abandon their home. Chaos ensues in a wild wagon ride through town as the Federals and Confederates engage in urban warfare. The tug of home is once again reprised as we see, not only their house, but their community as well, occupied by enemy Union forces.

Finally, Maxwell closes his opening triad of artistic devices with a quote from George Eliot. "A human life, I think, should be well rooted in some spot of native land, where it may get the love of tender kinship."

Eliot's naming of roots, native land, and tender kinship, mark again Maxwell's recurring theme of home. The Director weaves his message thoughtfully, using a battle scene, the Virginia countryside for the film's setting, and a brotherly alliance.

Union General Burnside's Irish Brigade charging the wall at Fredricksburg's Marye's Heights is reminiscent of the Pickett's Charge scene in the film *Gettysburg*. As wave after wave of soldiers in blue march across the open field toward Confederate fortifications, we see again the utter futility of war and the oft-times foolhardiness of those in command. Toward the conclusion of the distressing scene we see Colonel Robert MacMillan's 24th Georgia, also an Irish Brigade, defending the wall where Burnside's Irishmen are charging. Tears flow down the cheeks of one Confederate soldier as he fires his pistol at his charging Irish brothers. Roots indeed run deep and

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we are reminded that America is a nation of nations.

From the outset of the film it is clear that the Southern cause for fighting is to defend their “native land.” Except for the first scene in Washington and the few scenes of Chamberlain preparing for military duty in his native Maine, the story takes place almost entirely in Virginia. While *Gettysburg* studied three days of one battle, *Gods and Generals* stretches across two years and highlights three major battles: First Manassas, Fredricksburg, and Chancellorsville. Other battles and skirmishes occurred during this same time period, but Maxwell chose to tell his story using only these three battles on Virginia’s native soil.

The “tender kinship” aspect of the story is captured in several ways. In addition to witnessing the sibling affection between brothers Tom, played by C. Thomas Howell reprising his role from “Gettysburg” and Joshua Chamberlain, we also see many examples of the affection between “brothers in arms.” The relationship between Buster Kil-

rain, played by Kevin Conway, another “Gettysburg” alumnus, and the two Chamberlain brothers dramatizes the role of friendship in battle. We also see the kinship of brethren in arms portrayed amongst the many Confederate officers. The film itself is bookended with a new song from Bob Dylan titled “Across the Green Mountain,” the last powerful line of which proclaims, “we loved each other more than we ever dared tell.”

The three-and-a-half-hour “Gods and Generals” will probably not appeal to the type of viewer who looks for the heroes and villains to be clearly delineated and for the plot to be cleanly resolved in ninety minutes. This is a thinking person’s film, one which requires the muse to be activated, and grand themes to be pondered. Neither does this film portray the evils of slavery, which some have criticized, saying that the film paints an unbalanced portrait of the South. At its core, however, the film is simply a study in the character of men and women faced with war. And a right good film at that.