

Revisiting Gettysburg: A Poignant Encounter Of Soldiers And Civilians With History

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Review

REVISITING GETTYSBURG

A poignant encounter of soldiers and civilians with history

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Wheeler, Richard *Gettysburg 1863: Campaign of Endless Echoes*. Plume, ISBN 452281393

What makes Gettysburg so constantly engaging? One of America's most decisive battles, it shattered the mythic invincibility surrounding Robert E. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia, and, along with the fall of Vicksburg, it began the South's long agony to Appomattox. But something more causes rising interest in the Pennsylvania battle: at Gettysburg the past is "not even past," and myths and possibilities seem to haunt history.

Gettysburg has attracted much fine writing. Richard Wheeler's **Gettysburg 1863** ranks with the best. His easy, flowing style lets him tuck in people, scenes, observations, and new information without wrecking the narrative. He lets his characters develop awhile before the battle, and as a result, Lee, Meade, and their important subordinates are real and come off the pages in the crucible of action.

Casting a wide lens, Wheeler looks at the Confederate victory at Chancellorsville as perhaps triggering Lee's perception that his army was dauntless. Wheeler follows Union General Joseph Hooker's squirming after Chancellorsville through his replacement by Meade and traces Lee northward in late June 1863. The great cavalry battle at Brandy Station is reconstructed to show how Jeb Stuart's chagrin at this near defeat for the Confederates contributed to his decision to make the unwise wagon raid into Maryland. The lens focuses as the armies concentrate near Gettysburg. Wheeler sets a clear view of the town scene, showing how citizens met the ragged Rebels flooding the streets.

Tension mounts at Union and Confederate headquarters as the first and second days of the battle pass in a swirl of hectic fighting, and of chances taken, missed, or debated. The third day fills with oddities as Longstreet opposes a charge against Meade's center. Lee overrules Longstreet's suggestion to turn the Union flank and orders the frontal charge. Flamboyant George Pickett makes ready to lead, while the Rebel artillery begins a fearsome bombardment that roils some of Meade's front line and flails Federal wagon parks and depots -- and nearly empties Rebel caissons.

Battle narrative is a special Wheeler gift. Description of the three days' fighting around Gettysburg pulls the reader straight into the sound, fury, and anguish of Culp's Hill, Devil's Den, the Cemetery, and the Round Tops. The charge on July 3 is executed with all the furies of impossible gallantry. Wheeler's lens sweeps the whole of Pickett's Charge and zooms in on men trying to keep formation as they fall, and on the Union line holding steadily against artillery and the awesome mass in gray. Clearly seen are the survivors as they stream down the hill to meet a contrite Lee.

Wheeler is careful and sound in his assessment of why Meade did not pursue Lee's troops, despite constant urging from Washington. Although respectful of Lee's retreat from Gettysburg, Wheeler is nevertheless highly critical of Lee's plan and actions during the whole campaign. He reproaches the Confederate leader for permitting Stuart's quixotic raid that left the army without vital intelligence before and during the battle.

Scattered throughout the text are line drawings that evoke the period and depict the participants. Wheeler deliberately avoided reference notes because he thought they would only confuse readers. This omission is unfortunate because readers might have enjoyed pursuing new sources presented by the author. The bibliography is helpful (despite some omissions), but footnotes would have been even more helpful.

Frank E. Vandiver is distinguished professor of history at Texas A&M; University and author of Mighty Stonewall, Their Tattered Flags, Blood Brothers, and 1001 Things Everyone Should Know About the Civil War.