Gettysburg

Cornelius Cronin

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Review

Cronin, Cornelius
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Sears, Stephen W. *Gettysburg*. Houghton-Mifflin, $30.00 ISBN 395867614

Pennsylvania invasion

Campaign history offers lucid and detailed account

Stephen W. Sears' magisterial new volume, *Gettysburg*, does all the things that a reader can ask of a campaign history, and it does each of these things well. The narrative of the prelude to the battle is as much about politics, both civilian and military, as it is about the strategic, tactical, and logistic issues involved in moving two armies several hundred miles. As the two armies maneuver and deal with their respective governments, Sears intercuts from one army to the other in an almost cinematic way. As battle is joined, Sears' ability to write about events dense with names, places, and geographic locations in a transparently clear style allows the reader both to follow and understand the specific actions, and also to see how a large battle is made up of a number of smaller, more-or-less isolated, and desperately contested firefights. And after the armies have disengaged, the author is able to make clear how exhausted two armies are following such a battle. The reader is made to understand not only how Lincoln could be exasperated by Meade's failure to pursue the defeated Army of Northern Virginia more vigorously than he did, but also why such pursuits are rare after victories at any time in history, and how unlikely it is that anyone in command of the Army of the Potomac would have attempted such a pursuit. Finally, Sears deals with all of the key controversies surrounding the battle and provides his reasoned opinion on all of them. Those issues arising from personality are dealt with on that basis; those based on military concerns are dealt with consistently on the basis of understood conventional military practices and behaviors.

It would be difficult to overstate how challenging it is to write in detail about combat in a way that is comprehensible even to experienced readers of that kind of writing. Civil War combat is confusing and fluid. The complexities of narrating the action at Gettysburg on July 1 are immense. This was a meeting
engagement. Just as Heth had gotten two brigades of his division into line and on the move to overwhelm Buford's two cavalry brigades, John Reynolds arrived with the vanguard of the First Corps of the Army of the Potomac. The action that followed was chaotic; Confederate regiments attacking through a wheat field being mowed down by rifle volleys from two Union regiments that had managed to get set up just moments before, while on almost adjacent ground Confederate soldiers reversed the results, routing several Union regiments. This is a brief part of Sears' description of the action on page 178:

Men went down by the dozens, and wounded by the scores staggered to the rear, but there was no pause. Dawes kept shouting, Align on the colors! Close up on the colors! Then suddenly Yankees were lined up at the cut, firing down into the huddled defenders, yelling for their surrender. The right hand companies of the 6th got across the mouth of the cut, ready to fire down its length. There was a bitter, desperate struggle for the colors of the 2nd Mississippi. Yankees kept rushing for my flag and there were over a dozen shot down like sheep in their madly rush for the colors, the Mississippi color bearer, W. B. Murphy remembered. Finally a large man, Corporal Francis A. Wallar, 6th Wisconsin made a rush for me and the flag. As I tore the flag from the staff he took hold of me and the color.

The battle descriptions are full of page after page of this kind of writing, moving effortlessly from a long view to the actions and observations of individual soldiers. Everybody who writes about combat has tried to achieve this combination of overview and detail, at least since John Keegan's *The Face of Battle* pointed out the shortcomings of the older style of battle writing that stayed at the battalion level or above, but few can write about combat with the combination of clarity and detail that Sears displays in his descriptions of the fighting at Gettysburg.

One of the things that Sears is trying to do in this volume is to do justice to George Meade. He makes it apparent that he sees the Gettysburg campaign as Lee's weakest performance, almost from start to finish. He finds Lee guilty of having never grasped how much Dame Fortune had shaped his victory [at Chancellorsville], and he accuses Lee of fairly serious overconfidence. However, Sears does not concentrate on Lee. He deals with all the familiar controversies - what happened to J.E.B. Stuart, what about Lee and Longstreet - but he does take pains to make clear that what happened at Gettysburg was more because of what George Meade and his command did right than it was because of what Lee did wrong.
Sears finds Meade's performance admirable from beginning to end. Assuming command in the middle of the march through Maryland, Meade quickly made plans, including the fully developed plan to give battle on the Pipe Creek line, but then showed the flexibility to change those plans on the run. He had the confidence to delegate authority, in this case to John Reynolds, and then, on the basis of reports from Reynolds, made the decision to give battle at Gettysburg. On the second and third days, with the Army of the Potomac on the high ground, fighting from the preferred defensive, Meade showed flexibility and decisiveness in meeting and dealing with the crisis situations that developed. For example, he dealt decisively with the near disaster caused when 3rd Corps commander Dan Sickles (Described by Sears this way: As a corps commander, Dan Sickles was operating at a level far beyond his talents, and most everyone recognized it but Dan Sickles) placed his corps in a salient in front of the rest of the Yankee lines. He clearly recognized and made use of his best corps commanders, especially Winfield Scott Hancock, and he gave his able artillery commander, Henry Hunt, a free hand on the third day, when Hunt placed much of his artillery on the reverse slope of Cemetery Ridge, thus keeping it out of the pre-attack artillery battle, and then bringing it up to support the infantry in repulsing Pickett's charge. It is not that Meade was what an observer would call brilliant. It is that at this key moment, someone stepped forward to lead The Army of the Potomac with competence, boldness, and flexibility at a time when these were just the qualities that were required. There were those senior officers who performed badly â€“ Sedgwick, Howard, and Sickles, especially Sickles, but Meade and the rest of his command had the coolness, competence, and flexibility to make up for their shortcomings. Meade has often been slighted in other studies of Gettysburg. In Michl Shaara's popular novel The Killer Angels, and in the film based on the novel, he is virtually effaced. Sears, however, is determined to do him justice, and he does so.

The book is copiously illustrated, not only with the usual photographs, but also with a number of contemporary sketches and drawings, some by combat artists and some by participants in the battle. The illustrations are not printed on coated paper in a special section; they are printed on the text pages and placed with the relevant text. Because they are not printed on coated paper they lose a bit in resolution and detail; because they are placed where they will complement the text, they gain a great deal in usefulness. The maps, by George Skoch, are clear and very helpful. They contain enough detail about topography, unit placement and command, and unit movement to complement the narrative and
enable the reader to form a picture in his mind of what was happening.

Any campaign history assumes a reader with at least a minimal understanding of the whole war. This would not be a good book for a reader who had never read anything about the Civil War not assigned by a teacher. But for even a novice Civil War buff this would be the volume of choice to read about Gettysburg. And for serious Civil War buffs and historians this book, like all of Sears' campaign histories, is indispensable. In the crowded field of Gettysburg studies this book will have no trouble finding an audience, and it should quickly become the standard one volume history of the campaign.

Cornelius Cronin is a Career Instructor in the English Department at Louisiana State University, where he teaches a course on the literature of modern warfare and writes on literature and film from the Vietnam conflict.