

Beneath a Northern Sky: A Short History of the Gettysburg Campaign

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Review

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Woodworth, Steven E. *Beneath a Northern Sky: A Short History of the Gettysburg Campaign*. Scholarly Resources, \$14.95 ISBN 842029338

On Union soil

Lucid and engrossing narrative offers surprises

In **Beneath a Northern Sky: A Short History of the Gettysburg Campaign**, we have an interesting, fast-paced, and efficient narration of the battle and campaign. The author, Steven E. Woodworth, an associate professor of History at Texas Christian University and general editor of a series of books on the Civil War era, states at the outset that his book relies much more than usual on secondary sources; and the advantages and drawbacks of using relatively few, and recent, books on the subject are readily apparent in **Beneath a Northern Sky**.

Readers should not skip the brief preface, because it both effectively invites readers into what will be an engaging narrative, and alerts him or her to the necessity of thinking critically while reading the narrative. There is a predictable reference to Gettysburg as having spawned a voluminous literature, followed by a valid justification of presenting a new book meant for those just embarking on their study of Gettysburg and those who desire a summary overview of the recent scholarship. Unfortunately, that summary is presented as narrative; i.e., a novice reader would not know when he or she is receiving the results of a long-standing scholarly consensus or when the narrative is reflective of the controversial opinions of a few recent writers. Readers need to be wary at the outset, as Woodworth states that Gettysburg proved . . . the near impossibility of decisive action in the eastern theater û reinforced by later references to the East as a sideshow compared to the war in the West. This is not only unproven by Gettysburg, but also not provable at all: just consider the possible results of a stunning Confederate victory at Gettysburg as was achieved at Second Manassas.

Such *caveats* notwithstanding, the early sections of the book make **Beneath a Northern Sky** worth the price (of the paperback edition). Woodworth is not intimidated by long-standing mythology pertaining to either side in the war. This is perhaps the chief advantage of his using a relatively shallow foreground of secondary sources. For example, he views Gen. Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia objectively, rather than through the cameo lens of that army's legendary invincibility: referring to the war in the West, Woodworth remarks that Ulysses S. Grant . . . [led] a Union army whose confidence and striking power matched that of Lee's own. Of much greater importance, however, is Woodworth's devotion of a full chapter to Lee's army's plundering in Pennsylvania. Several pages of quotations from Confederate soldiers themselves show that indeed the Army of Northern Virginia intended to supply itself at will and at the expense of Northern citizens, paying, when paying at all, in worthless Confederate money. Lee's order mandating restraint had a definite purpose, according to Woodward: to make the Confederacy appear more virtuous than the Union — an appearance successfully conveyed down to the present day, as portrayed by both books and film. However, the Confederate commanding general is shown by Woodward as ignoring his own order; and Woodward concludes that the Army of Northern Virginia's record in Pennsylvania was comparable to the one Union armies would compile during the war when they marched through various parts of the South. But the author reminds us that the Confederate army in Pennsylvania was a scourge far worse than any troops who ever marched behind William Tecumseh Sherman, and that was in kidnapping free citizens and carrying them off into slavery. Confederate officers as high as corps command level are noted to have issued instructions for the abduction of African Americans. One witness is quoted as seeing blacks from her town driven by just like we would drive cattle, observing that most were women and children, and wondering what the Rebels want with those little babies.' Woodworth concludes that this was plundering with an ideological bent and a reminder of why the two sides were fighting and what the real issue was between them.

The decisions made by each army's high command leading to the meeting at Gettysburg are clearly recounted. Some readers will be surprised to see that the Union commander, Maj. Gen. George G. Meade, is considered to have been only adequate. New to army command, Meade is pictured as somewhat hesitant in decision-making and tardy in approaching the field. Elsewhere, and in his correspondence and orders, Meade can be seen as surprisingly aggressive and

decisive. Equally surprising is the author's favorable treatment of Maj. Gen. O. O. Howard, whose placement of the Eleventh Corps, less than firm control of the battlefield, and somewhat questionable attitude when Maj. Gen. Winfield Scott Hancock arrived to supersede him have received criticism by many analysts of the battle. The commander of the Union Twelfth Corps, whose name, Slocum, has prompted critics then and now to call him Slow Come, is not seen here as negligent or overly attentive to his own reputation in refraining from immediately marching his corps toward the sound of the guns, but is treated by Woodworth as a competent and professional officer -- as indeed he was everywhere else in the war. The nature and importance of the stand of the First Corps in general, and of some units of the Eleventh Corps, are given full play in the book (though both somewhat compressed); and the brave and persistent Confederate assaults are presented forcefully. Especially well done is Woodworth's recounting of the last moments of Sergeant Amos Humiston of New York, whose orphaned children's photograph was displayed all across the Union following the battle. (The children became the first residents, and their mother the first caretaker, of the orphans' home established in Gettysburg consequent to the publicity arising from the Humiston story.) The continuing controversy regarding whether Confederate General Ewell, or General Lee himself, was responsible for the Army of Northern Virginia's not making a final push to dislodge the defenders of Cemetery Hill is concluded quickly with the correct observation that Lee was in command and present in person on the battlefield. However, the question of whether or not another attack *should* have been made is untreated -- as is probably appropriate in a short book.

However, controversial judgment is not avoided in the narratives of days two and three of the battle. Again, both days are described in well-paced chapters, supplied with pertinent and effective quotations from participants. The ad hoc and sometimes confusing series of engagements on the Union left flank during the second day's fighting are described clearly and compellingly. However, the author has adopted for his narrative's point of view a highly critical assessment of Confederate Lt. Gen. James Longstreet. He is depicted as slow, sluggish, and less than fully cooperative with his commanding general on day two. Harsh criticism of Longstreet has a long and inglorious tradition, beginning with Confederate General Jubal Early, who among other things probably was trying to cover up his own failings at Gettysburg. Woodworth revives this generally discredited tradition, relying perhaps on one somewhat idiosyncratic author in particular, and presents it as fact. Longstreet, we read on page 107,

disliked and distrusted Lee, largely because he was jealous of him. Such an opinion reads back into Gettysburg the statements Longstreet wrote after the war in response to the vicious and dishonorable goading he was receiving by Early and others who were attempting to shift blame for loss of the great battle from Lee to someone else, preferably not themselves. Longstreet is called sullen and desirous of delaying the Confederate attack; but these are egregious judgments made against a professional soldier, whose actions elsewhere leave no doubt of his commitment to victory. Worse yet, Longstreet is pictured as willing to sabotage his commander's efforts on day three.

Lee wanted to attack the Union center on the third day, but Longstreet had other ideas -- of course. In fact, we are told, Longstreet did not want anyone to believe this attack would succeed. Even if this opinion were correct, it would still be merely an opinion and should have been presented as such. A longer book could summarize the evidence on both sides of the Longstreet controversy; likewise a book with a longer view of sources would not present tenuous and extreme assumptions as elements of an otherwise effective narrative.

That there is insufficient depth of sources behind this book comes out in some small ways as well. Union general Lysander Cutler is referred to as Lyman Cutler twice, Warfield Ridge on the south end of the battlefield is referred to as nameless, and two well-known photographs are misidentified. (Both are from the south end of the battlefield: one is captioned as having been taken near McPherson's Woods, several miles away; the other is captioned as being from the Wheatfield, a quarter mile distant.) All books contain these types of small flaws, and these are relatively minor. Perhaps of somewhat more importance is a quotation from a letter by Confederate general William Dorsey Pender, to the effect that in the invasion, the people of the North would now feel the hard hand of war. Quoted from a secondary source, the statement lacks context. Familiarity with Pender's letters would show that one might read his statement not as a vigorous justification of invasion, but as part of a long and thoughtful rumination, full of misgivings, related to the morality of invading the North.

The book is lucid and engrossing. Occasionally, however, it is as if the seriousness of the subject is forgotten. On page 92 we read of an attack that enveloped a line of defenders and squashed them like bugs. Later it is stated somewhat fatuously, Sharpshooters on both sides were playing for keeps. But with the exception of the rare misstep, descriptions are vivid, and quotations by witnesses are well-placed û as in the following moment during the Confederate

attack on the Iron Brigade making their last stand in front of the Lutheran Seminary buildings: 'Their ranks went down like grass before a scythe,' a soldier of the Nineteenth Indiana later recalled. 'They lay in piles before us,' wrote a Wisconsin soldier. That these phrases long ago became familiar to readers does not make them anything less than necessary here, as pictures of the nature of war. For such reminders, and for placing the battle of Gettysburg in its proper context — as well as for its exposition of the battle — **Beneath a Northern Sky** is worthwhile reading.

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