

Gettysburg: This Hallowed Ground

John Stauffer

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Review

Stauffer, John

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Gramm, Kent (poetry) and Heisey, Chris (photographs). *Gettysburg: This Hallowed Ground*. Tide-Mark Press, \$19.95 ISBN 1559498846

Visual verse

Photographs and parallel poetry memorialize the memorial

How do you photograph memories of death? It's an interesting dilemma, especially when the deaths--more than 50,000--occurred over 140 years ago during three days of fighting. Photography freezes time, while memories (and history) connect the past to the present, reflecting a fluid conception of time. You can't photograph the past, can't repeat it, though Gatsby and many others have tried. A camera can only memorialize the present or rememorialize the past.

Gettysburg: This Hallowed Ground is a eulogy of Gettysburg--not of the battle itself, but of its collective memory, enshrined as a national historical site. It couples Chris Heisey's photographs with Kent Gramm's poems, a *pas de deux* of image and text facing each other throughout the book. In this sense it is reminiscent of Alexander Gardner's *Photographic Sketch Book of the Civil War* (1866), in which Gardner's prose responds to the image on the facing page. Gardner's book chronicles the war; it begins with the Marshall House, supposedly the site of the war's first casualty, and ends with the dedication of the monument to Bull Run. The sequence mirrors the war's chronology; mix it up and you lose the sense of story. But **Gettysburg** does not chronicle the battle; there's no story-line, no progression from July 1-3 as you read through the book. There is no sense of change over time. In fact there is a stillness throughout the book, a sense of stasis, as though memories of the past remain forever present.

And yet **Gettysburg** powerfully evokes the historical battle. It does so by utilizing two aesthetic forms: wonder and the sublime. Both wonder and the sublime involve rare experience, as Phil Fisher has noted. Their power depends on an experience, image, or feeling that is rare or unique. Wonder and the

sublime enable us to reflect back on ourselves and our connections to history and the cosmos, and they tap into spiritual feelings of the infinite. Kent Gramm, in his introduction, suggests that representations of Gettysburg are wondrous and sublime. He compares the battlefield to other examples of American beauty: The Grand Canyon and the Rocky Mountains receive millions of visitors yearly--and they go there for beauty. So too Gettysburg: visitors come with curiosity, but leave with a deep and terrible beauty engraved upon their imaginations. The best way to understand something is to see it by the light of beauty. Gramm ends his ode to Gettysburg by likening it to Keats' ode on a Grecian urn, where beauty is truth, and truth beauty.

But wonder and the sublime are not the same aesthetic experiences. Wonder involves pleasure, awe, and joy. You experience wonder when you see a rainbow emerge after a storm. The sublime couples horror and delight, terror and joy. Gramm's characterization of Gettysburg as terrible beauty perfectly captures sublimity. But over the course of the 20th century, sublimity increasingly began to smack of piousness, heroism, sentimentalism, or the grotesque. When this happens, the sublime looks a lot like kitsch. Wonder and kitsch: these are the two forms of experience that characterize **Gettysburg**.

Some of the images, especially winter scenes, preserve a sense of wonder about the historical battle and the present-day site. Heisey prefers photographing winter at Gettysburg, which seems appropriate, for the desolation of the season recalls the air of death during battle. In *Split Rail Fence--Peach Orchard*, on page 4, there are no monuments to heroic soldiers, no men of stone or symmetry of pattern, as Gramm writes elsewhere. It is a deceptively simple but beautiful image of a split-rail fence, dripping with icicles, that runs diagonally across a composition of icy blades of grass and a barren ice-covered tree. It is an elegiac image, and the icicles seem, like the photograph itself, suspended in time. The unfamiliarity of this battlefield image encourages us to dwell on it, and to spend time with the poem on the facing page. The poem's title, *Blue and Gray*, furthers the sense of mystery; it relates to a picture that lacks all traces of blue and gray.

Spider Web—Wheatfield is another powerful and haunting image. The web sparkles with morning dew, and is of course richly symbolic, suggesting (among other things) how the web of war (then and now) can ensnare young boys with romantic visions of courage, honor, and glory.

Unfortunately, however, most of the images have the look of patriotic postcards. Gone is the sense of mystery, wonder, and symbolic links to the past. In *Confederate General Robert E. Lee--Seminary Ridge*, a monument of the legendary general on his horse Traveler is partly shrouded in fog, as if to suggest that Lee has mythic or supernatural powers. The accompanying poem, in which Lee speaks to us, further conveys his godlike status: You mortals craning necks down there below, it begins, and ends by noting that Lee, like Jesus, had been made man: I was a man.

Photographing monuments and statues always suffer from the threat of redundancy as art; and this method contributes to so many of the images looking like postcard kitsch. They are radiant with color and brilliantly reproduced; but they also glorify war. Melville's line from *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of War* (1866) offers an appropriate antidote to the numerous statues of heroic soldiers and words bespeaking honor and glory: what like a bullet can undecieve.

One of the most haunting images in the book, *Rest in Peace*, shows two gravestones. In front of one gravestone stands an American flag, in front of the other, a Confederate flag, both new and unsoiled. Heisey photographed the scene on a rainy Memorial Day, which suggests his theme: to rememorialize the dead and reunite old foes. Gramm's poem, *Brought Forth*, reinforces the theme of reunion: soldiers on both sides were tender-hearted sons of liberty who, to defend their mothers/ were quick to shoulder guns. It is a haunting image not for what it displays, but for what it betrays, or rather withholds: the fact that reconciliation between North and South came at the cost of African-American liberties, as David Blight has shown. That this theme of sectional reconciliation persists, at the expense of blacks (there are none in the book), reveals the degree to which, in ideological terms, the South won the war.

Heisey has a keen eye for detail and is a technical master of color photography. But he loses his focus, and listens to preconceived ideas about the war instead of looking, childlike and wondrous, at the landscape around him. He tries too hard to photograph memories, to visually recreate the past. In seeking sublimity, he finds kitsch. Gramm tells us that his poems are responses to the beauty of the photographs. But when beauty turns to kitsch, the response to it becomes sickly sweet or insincere--a simulacrum of Civil War era poetry.

John Stauffer is the author of The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race (2002), which won the Frederick

Douglass Book Prize and was the Lincoln Prize runner-up. He is Professor of English and the History of American Civilization Program at Harvard University, and is completing a new book, By the Love of Comrades: American Interracial Friendships, History and Myth. He can be reached at stauffer@fas.harvard.edu.