

Glorious War: The Civil War Adventures of George Armstrong Custer

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Review

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Hatch, Thom *Glorious War: The Civil War Adventures of George Armstrong Custer*. St. Martin's Press, \$28.99 ISBN 978-1-250-02850-1

Custer Before Little Big Horn

Thom Hatch is the author of several works focused on the history of the American west and aimed at a popular audience. His most recent offering, *Glorious War: The Civil War Adventures of George Armstrong Custer*, seeks to rehabilitate Custer's reputation as a military commander based on his service as a cavalry officer in the American Civil War, a view based largely on what Hatch maintains was Custer's critical role in the Union victory at the Battle of Gettysburg.

Beginning with Custer's admission to West Point in 1857, Hatch relates the story of his early military career and personal life, from his service with the Second U.S. Cavalry at Bull Run through his rise to command of the Third Cavalry Division by Appomattox. Hatch seems to be primarily a storyteller who seeks to entertain his audience with a stirring yarn of military glory in days passed; at the very least, that is the type of work he has crafted. His desire to spin a tale rather than inform, however, deprives his book of a proper focus. At times he relates military operations in which Custer did not participate, such as Shiloh, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Vicksburg, and William T. Sherman's March to the Sea. He also recounts the activities of men with whom Custer had been friends at West Point, even when their activities had little do with Custer's Civil War, and he devotes extensive space to the Confederate cavalry under J. E. B. Stuart, setting aside nearly three full pages to detail Stuart's final hours. The space devoted to Custer's personal life also seems out of place in a work that reassesses his leadership capabilities. Moreover, Hatch's concern for a good story also leads him to provide a highly romanticized depiction of Civil War combat, one that is (as his title indicates) "glorious," with heroic soldiers boldly following their courageous leaders no matter the cost. This romanticized

perspective may result from an over-reliance on post-war memoirs, but Hatch allows it to color his interpretations. He concludes in an epilogue, for instance, that the later debacle at the Little Bighorn was the fault of the soldiers who were no longer willing to “follow their commander blindly . . . regardless of risk” (307). These issues that derive from the author’s focus on a good story, however, are only minor ones.

There are also major interpretive concerns. Despite modern scholarship on Philip Sheridan’s 1864 Shenandoah campaign, such as Mark Neely’s *The Civil War and the Limits of Destruction* (Harvard University Press, 2007), Hatch paints this operation as one of total warfare, targeting all civilians in the valley with “a systematic reign of terror” (280). The author also depicts the Emancipation Proclamation as establishing “another goal to attain in this conflict of states’ rights,” as if slavery and the war were utterly unrelated until September 1862 (78). Most egregious of all is Hatch’s treatment of Gettysburg, which is central to his attempt to rehabilitate Custer’s military reputation. He argues that Robert E. Lee’s plan to attack the Union center on July 3 was a brilliant design in which the Confederate cavalry under J. E. B. Stuart was supposed to play a crucial part. According to Hatch, the Confederate troopers would “wade into the Union rear in coordination with Pickett’s charge... and create mass confusion as well as weakening the [Union] line by killing as many [men] as possible and drawing away the enemy to fight the cavalry” (139). This is not a new interpretation in popular histories of the war; Tom Carhart offered a similar view in *Lost Triumph: Lee’s Real Plan at Gettysburg--And Why It Failed* (G. P. Putam’s Sons, 2005), a book that Hatch lists in his bibliography but, curiously, does not cite in his discussion of Gettysburg. This view of the third day of the Pennsylvania battle, however, has been rejected by historians for a lack of solid evidence.¹ To support this contention, Hatch cites and quotes J. E. B. Stuart’s report of the battle, noting that “Stuart’s mission was without a doubt . . . ‘to effect a surprise on the enemy’s rear’” (152). This seems to be a stretch since Stuart reported only that he “*hoped* to effect a surprise on the enemy’s rear,” not that he had orders to do so, and in fact, Lee’s report of the Gettysburg campaign makes no mention at all of a planned cavalry assault on the Union rear in coordination with Pickett’s ill-fated charge. It seems that Hatch merely adopts this view of Gettysburg because if true, it would elevate Custer’s actions in stopping Stuart’s advance to a critical component of the Union victory at Gettysburg.²

Hatch's uncritical acceptance of an unproven theory about the role of Confederate cavalry at Gettysburg in order to magnify the significance of his particular subject is only one of many instances that mark this book as hagiography rather than biography. Quite simply, Custer could do no wrong and was central to ultimate Union victory in the war. For instance, Hatch claims that Philip Sheridan's 1864 Shenandoah Valley campaign, in which Custer commanded a cavalry division, "all but guaranteed Lincoln's reelection," though Hatch does not credit the fall of Atlanta or the capture of Mobile Bay for contributing to Lincoln's victory (285). Similarly, while Custer's role in the war is magnified, his failings are glossed over. When his official reports differed from those of others, Hatch concludes that "Custer cannot be blamed for perhaps embellishing his role" to impress the young woman he was courting (102). And when Custer ignored orders to rest his men and instead set out on his own authority to capture four Confederate supply trains at Appomattox Station, Hatch concludes that the supply trains "naturally took precedence" over Custer's orders (298).

A final problem with *Glorious War* is Hatch's use of sources. Most of his secondary sources are popular histories, while he neglects much of the rich academic scholarship on the Civil War. At the same time, his primary materials are skewed towards post-war writings that were produced long after the immediacy of the events that they described had passed. While he employs the *Official Records* and makes light use of a few collections of contemporary papers by Custer or people favorably disposed to him, this may not be enough to offset the memoir literature that is likely responsible for his overly-romanticized depiction of Civil War combat.

Overall there is little that is new or worthy of attention in Hatch's examination of Custer's Civil War career. If anything this work is a reminder to professionally-trained historians to make a greater effort to write for a wider public. If instead we continue to write highly specialized studies for our own consumption, works such as the one under review will continue to appear in order to fulfill the public's desire for accessible histories on popular topics, leaving the historical profession with little influence on popular perceptions of the past.

Mark A. Smith is an associate professor of history at Fort Valley State University in central Georgia. His book, Engineering Security: The Corps of Engineers and Third System Defense Policy, 1815-1861 (University of Alabama

Press, 2009), examines the national defense policy developed and implemented by the Corps of Engineers between the War of 1812 and the Civil War. He is currently working on a study of the political activities of officers in the antebellum Corps of Engineers.

¹John D. Foster, Review of *Retreat from Gettysburg* by Kent Masterson Brown and *Lost Triumph* by Tom Carhart, *Journal of Southern History* 72, no. 3 (August 2006), 678-79; Brian Holden Reid, Review of *Lost Triumph* by Tom Carhart, *Journal of Military History* 71, no. 1 (January 2007), 228-29. See also Allen C. Guelzo, *Gettysburg: The Last Invasion* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 376; Emory M. Thomas, "Eggs, Aldie, Sheperdstown, and J. E. B. Stuart," in *The Gettysburg Nobody Knows*, ed. Gabor S. Boritt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 111-14.

²J. E. B. Stuart to R. H. Chilton, 20 August 1863, in *O.R.*, series 1, vol. 27, part 2, 697 (emphasis added); R. E. Lee to S. Cooper, __ January 1864, in *O.R.*, series 1, vol. 27, part 2, 320-21.