Searching for George Gordon Meade: The Forgotten Victor of Gettysburg

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Review

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Huntington, Tom *Searching for George Gordon Meade: The Forgotten Victor of Gettysburg*. Stackpole Books, \$32.95 ISBN 978-0-8117-0813-5

Placing a General in the Proper Context

Despite winning the victor's laurel at Gettysburg for what was, at least arguably, the most important Union victory of the war, George Gordon Meade has never quite found a comfortable niche in the pantheon of great Union generals. The fundamental problem is that he won no other battles, showed no other spark of tactical or strategic daring, and in fact, commanded the Army of the Potomac in name only for most of the rest of the war. Nor did it help Meade's historical standing to become the target of a campaign of self-serving slander, heaped upon his head by the vengeful Dan Sickles, or that Meade was politically identified with the McClellan ring, or that he had an irascible temper and a patrician top-loftiness of manner. He had neither the romantic dash of a McClellan nor the democratic simplicity of Ulysses Grant. So, over time, Meade became so invisible that when the journalist Tom Huntington read through an article in a Civil War magazine on forgotten generals, he was struck by how the article, notwithstanding its theme, still managed to forget George Meade.

And yet, there remains that wonderful Gettysburg laurel, won for what Alexander Webb called "the Waterloo of the rebellion." Surely a general who beat Robert E. Lee must possess nothing lesser than the genius of a Lee? And if so, why does he suffer from such a stunted reputation? This contradiction caught the curiosity of Huntington, the former editor of *Historic Traveler* and *American History* magazines, and propelled him onto a "search" for the man he calls, in *Searching for George Gordon Meade*, the "Rodney Dangerfield of Civil War generals" -- because "he gets no respect." This is not, as Huntington warns, a biography of Meade. It may be a "participatory biography," in the sense that Huntington introduces to a variety of people who still hold up the general's laurel for admiration. But it is more, on the pattern of Tony Horwitz's

Confederates in the Attic or Andy Ferguson's *Land of Lincoln*, a travelogue of Huntington's journeys to places associated with Meade, as if the places themselves could somehow be persuaded to divulge the key to the mystery of George G. Meade. Which assumes, of course, that there is a mystery in the first place.

Huntington's pilgrimages begin with Gettysburg, shift quickly to West Point (where Meade was a cadet, Class of '35), then to Brownsville, Texas (where Meade saw his first action, at the battle of Palo Alto), and then on to Meade's Civil War battlefields. Before Gettysburg, that meant the Peninsula, Second Bull Run, South Mountain, Antietam, Fredericksburg, and Chancellorsville. Through it all, Huntington is clearly struggling to make sense of a man who almost deliberately baffles inquiry. He is testy and short-tempered, primly self-concerned with promotion and recognition, and determined to keep his nose clean. And Huntington is quite well aware, from having read much of Meade's family papers, that Meade owed a great deal to George McClellan, had relatives fighting for the Confederacy (his brother-in-law was Henry Wise) and sympathized with the McClellanite outlook on the war. (George Meade, jnr., in an effort to airbrush his father into an uncomplicated non-political officer who was simply doing his duty, bowdlerized many of these papers when he included them in the *Life and Letters of George Gordon Meade*, which is one reason why Meade has so often appeared in Civil War narratives as both blameless and colorless at the same time). Meade did not mind telling Southerners that he believed both sides had an approximately equal claim to be waging a just war (a view not widely shared among 3.9 million black slaves).

The centerpiece of the book, naturally enough, returns to Gettysburg, which consumes six of the book's eighteen chapters. These chapters include stops by Huntington at every point in the Gettysburg campaign from the roadside marker which notes the place where command of the Army of the Potomac was thrust on Meade, to a Remembrance Day parade in Gettysburg. Huntington renders a dutiful account of Meade's battle, but has curiously little to say about the aftermath of Gettysburg. There is no critical assessment of Meade's failure to attack Lee at Williamsport; even the post-battle controversies generated by the self-serving accusations of Dan Sickles and the inquisition set up by the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War in the spring of 1864 get only nine pages'-worth of attention. This is an unusual oversight, since the Meade inquiry was clearly the highest-profile investigation conducted by the Committee during the war – higher even than the persecution of Charles Stone or the trial of

Fitz-John Porter (two other prominent members of the McClellan fraternity). And the Committee's case rested on more than merely the imbecile animus of Sickles – Abner Doubleday, Albion Howe, and even Winfield Scott Hancock offered testimony which might have been enough to warrant Meade's dismissal from command under almost any other circumstances.

What deflated the inquiry was Lincoln's shrewd decision to bring Grant east, which effectively accomplished the dismissal of Meade without actually incurring the political risks in 1864 of removing the only successful battle commander the Army of the Potomac had ever had. Although Grant was at first inclined to let Meade call the tactical shots on the Overland Campaign, the relationship between the two men deteriorated rapidly, and by the time Grant crossed the James in June, 1864, Meade had been reduced to acting as little more than a glorified adjutant. It never seems to have occurred to Grant to invite Meade to the surrender meeting at Appomattox Court House (even though Grant had breakfast with Meade that morning) – a question which Huntington, curiously, doesn't ask either.

Meade's postwar career was short and uneventful. Andrew Johnson appointed Meade to command of the 3rd Military District during Reconstruction. But Meade undid himself in 1868 by his reluctance to prosecute Southern bushwhackers who shot down thirty-nine Republican freedmen at a political rally at Camilla, Georgia. Meade parceled out blame equally to the freedmen and their murderers, charging no one. Grant's election to the presidency later in 1868 put an end to Meade's career as a peace-maker, and in 1872 he died in Philadelphia of heart failure.

At the end of Huntington's rambles – at Meade's grave in Laurel Hill Cemetery, with members of the Meade Society – he has still found no key to the impenetrable man who, he admits, "will remain overlooked and nearly forgotten." And perhaps there is no key, apart from what is hidden in plain sight in the political history of the Army of the Potomac. It does Meade no injustice to say simply that he belonged in a general way to the Democratic party, and in an equally general way to those who, like McClellan, believed that the war had been caused as much by abolitionist incitement as by Southern treason. Like McClellan, he was cautious, to the point of making caution a fetish rather than a virtue.

But there still remains this question: was it *only* caution on Meade's part which allowed the Army of Northern Virginia to escape from its post-Gettysburg trap at Williamsport – or was it yet another dreary example of McClellanite generals unwilling to hand Radical Republicans too decisive a victory, hoping that they could somehow run out the clock and settle the unpleasantness themselves? This is not enough of a biography to say one way or the other. It is only a search, and the search will doubtless continue for a long while yet.

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