

Gettysburg: The Final Invasion

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Recommended Citation

Gannon, Barbara (2013) "Gettysburg: The Final Invasion," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 15 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.15.4.13

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol15/iss4/13>

Review

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Fall 2013

Guelzo, Allen C. *Gettysburg: The Final Invasion*. Knopf, \$35.00 ISBN 978-0-307-59408-2

The Final Invasion not the Final Word

According to WorldCat, the world's largest online bibliographic database, there are at least 3,327 books associated with the subject heading for the Battle of Gettysburg. Given the extensive historiography, you may wonder what a new book might say about this subject that has not been said by someone else. Allen Guelzo, the Henry R. Luce Professor of the Civil War, Director of Civil War Era Studies at Gettysburg College, and award-winning author, manages the near impossible and says something new in *Gettysburg: The Final Invasion*. What prompted so many to spill so much ink about a tragedy that incurred at least 50,000 casualties? Partly, the three-day battle reflects a perfect three-act dramatic arc. In an almost Shakespearean prologue, Robert E. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia invaded Pennsylvania hoping for a decisive battle, earlier that year he had won his greatest victory at Chancellorsville, but lost his talented subordinate Stonewall Jackson. On day one of this meeting engagement, the Union is defeated and pushed back through the crossroads town of Gettysburg, though Confederate forces failed to take critical positions that would have made any Union defensive line untenable. On the second day, numerous attacks by Confederate forces on the Union left and right left Union soldiers reeling; ultimately, these attacks failed. Because Confederate forces seemed so close to a breakthrough, Lee decided that just one more attack might bring victory. The third day dawns and, in a climactic final act, Lee ordered a desperate attack on the center, Picket's Charge, which ends in bloody glory at the high water mark of the Confederacy. For the Union Army, particularly the hard-luck Army of the Potomac, Gettysburg represents the perfect redemptive victory: for the Confederacy, the perfect tragic defeat.

Long after the guns fall silent, Gettysburg became another battleground in the post war battle for Civil War memory, particular among those who advocated the “Lost Cause”— Southerner’s Civil War memory. Those who deified Lee tried to explain this loss by rejecting the notion that it was his fault; instead, one of his subordinates let him down. James Longstreet, his senior corps commander, became a Republican after the war and dared to question Lee’s actions in Pennsylvania, for some Southerners, he became the perfect scapegoat. Others Lee defenders chose Richard Ewell; who failed to press Union forces on the first day. While these men were present on the field, others wondered if it was the absent cavalry commander, Jeb Stuart, that lost the battle. On the Union side, Northerners wondered if George Meade, the Union commander, was merely lucky, or did he demonstrate his true abilities at Gettysburg. One hundred and fifty years later these debates continue.

While there likely will never be a fully satisfactory resolution to these disputes, you will never read a better-written, better-researched attempt to answer these questions. First this is brilliant narrative history. While a compelling account of the battle, it is the sheer elegance and eloquence of his language that makes this study unique. Second, it is an outstanding military history. Guelzo vividly recreates the battle, both the experiences of commanders and the perspective of the common soldier. As part of his discussion of these leaders, he addresses the many controversies that emerged after the battle; for example, he argues that Longstreet was not as dilatory as Lee apologist’s believed, nor was Meade as decisive as his supporters suggest.

While students of this particular battle may find his assessment of these particular controversies of great interest, his most important contribution is much broader. First, he argues something that might surprise Gettysburg devotees—the battle did not represent the highest order of the military art. According to Guelzo, “the American Civil War—and the Battle of Gettysburg in particular—were conducted with an amateurism of spirit and an innocence of intent which would be touching if that same amateurism had not also contrived to make it so bloody" (xvi). In his view, this amateurism answers one of the most vigorously contested questions in Civil War studies: Was the Civil War a Total War? He argues in the negative. “There are few things more impressive than the sheer *lack* of totality on both the battle of Gettysburg and the Civil War as a whole, and few things more humiliating than the bewildered, small-town incompetence with which American soldiers addressed themselves to the task of managing, directing, and commanding the mammoth citizen-armies they had

called forth"(xvi-xvii). Guelzo is questioning one of the central suppositions of all Civil War military history that battlefield incompetence is somehow outside the norm and, therefore, it must be explained. The Civil War makes more sense if you understand that four long and bloody years of war demonstrated military amateurism, not military aptitude. If this is true, then Guelzo and other scholars studying the military history of the Civil War may want to relegate debates originated by Lost Cause apologists to discursive footnotes and focus their efforts on the implications of this reassessment of Civil War armies.

Finally, Guelzo identified something in the landscape of a free society that may explain the Union victory. It is something only someone who has studied and lived for decades near the battlefield might discover. I refuse to spoil the ending of this book by identifying this feature. Overall, I cannot recommend this book enough; it is a wonderful reminder of both the beauty and power of a brilliantly-executed narrative history.

Barbara A. Gannon is an assistant professor of history at the University of Central Florida and the author of The Won Cause: Black and White Comradeship in the Grand Army of the Republic.