

Jeb Stuart and the Confederate Defeat at Gettysburg

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Review

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Robinson, Warren C. *Jeb Stuart and the Confederate Defeat at Gettysburg.* University of Nebraska Press, \$24.95 hardcover ISBN 9780803211018

The Case of Jeb Stuart at Gettysburg

The story of General James Ewell Brown Stuart is among the most-chronicled in the Civil War story. Considered by legions to be the archetype of Virginia and southern manhood, Jeb Stuart perhaps as much as any Confederate military figure came to represent both the Lost Cause and the cause lost within decades after his battlefield death at Yellow Tavern, Virginia, in May 1864. As Warren C. Robinson notes within the preface of *Jeb Stuart and the Confederate Defeat at Gettysburg*, the famed cavalry chieftain has stirred small and large doses of controversy both during his career and in the decades that followed. Nowhere, certainly, has the microscope focused more absorbedly upon the Virginian's deeds than during the 1863 Pennsylvania campaign. Stuart's wayward ride around the Federal Army of the Potomac is labeled by many as the essential factor explaining Rebel defeat at Gettysburg, while others stridently defend the famed cavalier against the barbs of his critics, pointing instead to vagaries in orders from the Army of Northern Virginia's redoubtable commander, General Robert E. Lee, as setting the stage for mission failure and (ultimately) Confederate misfortune in the campaign. The author seeks to answer affirmatively his own question: Can anything new really be added to this century-old debate? In so doing, Robinson promises ambitiously to clarify historical mysteries, settle historiographical feuds, and even presents an alternate history of the campaign, a look into what might have been if Stuart had followed a less-ambitious course in carrying out his task.

Robinson, professor emeritus of economics at the Pennsylvania State University and author of numerous recent studies concerning higher education policy and demographics, is an enthusiastic devotee of Civil War history— even a cursory read of this book would suggest—and is generally competent in the

narrative aspects of Stuart's Gettysburg story. After setting the strategic and operational setting during the first half of 1863 in the East, Robinson details the Army of Northern Virginia's northward movements into the Shenandoah and Loudoun valleys. A look at competing visions over the proper role of the cavalry arm during the Civil War precedes detailed discussions of Lee's orders to Stuart before the latter embarked upon his ride on June 25. Robinson then discusses Stuart's options in conducting his raid, followed by separate-chapter treatments of the Virginian's foray into Maryland and Pennsylvania and, penultimately, the clash at the Gettysburg crossroads itself.

The nagging feeling among military, Civil War, or even Gettysburg historians when presented with a volume such as this is that an author, however earnest, may find it difficult to offer any perspective that is new (and, more importantly perhaps, enduring) to such a well-worn subject. In promising a fresh approach utilizing new evidence and interpretations (x), Robinson heightens expectations among scholars—an uncommonly cynical group indeed. These expectations, regrettably, remain unfulfilled. His purpose in writing this volume, it becomes apparent after reading its preface, is to flatly condemn Stuart for his failure during the Pennsylvania campaign to carry out the primary duty of a cavalry chief in the middle nineteenth century: to provide the essential intelligence necessary for an army commander to identify and evaluate enemy movements and predilections. Of this there exists some debate among Civil War scholars, to be sure, but Robinson himself then raises the stakes almost absurdly high. In being absent from Lee and in failing to provide that essential intelligence, Stuart, the author assures the reader, failed his commander and his cause in what was *the* pivotal battle of the war, a contest that, if won by Lee, may likely have resulted in a long-term occupation of Pennsylvania and, more importantly, a negotiated peace between the warring sections. That this point might create unease within the scholarly community is almost so self-evident to seem superfluous.

Much of what follows resembles a lawyer's brief rather than historical investigation and analysis. Robinson painstakingly deconstructs Lee's intentions, Stuart's concerns, the commander's orders and communications to Stuart on June 22-23, not to mention the input (both during the campaign and afterward) of such luminaries as James Longstreet and John Singleton Mosby. In his presentation of these and other events, the author repeatedly tenders speculation with an air of almost smug certainty, offering little in the realm of concrete support to bolster his claims. Indeed, his new evidence consists largely of nods to the

already-published secondary works of Stephen W. Sears and Edwin Fishel. Most regrettably, Robinson's examination of the existing literature on Stuart's ride proves inadequate, undertaken seemingly to identify and refute errors in the writings of Civil War historians/authors Edward Longacre, Mark Nesbitt, and others—many of which defend Stuart and his behavior throughout the campaign—rather than offer contextual understanding of historiographical trends. Dismissing others' evaluations of events that counter his own as legalistic, grammarian, and emotional, Robinson fails to rise above the controversy and provide intellectual clarity that is at once insightful and civil.

Capping this disappointing effort is a venture into what has become a recurring, if not prevailing, trend within Gettysburg and Civil War historiography: the counterfactual campaign study. Speculation vis-à-vis alternate outcomes is perhaps as old as historical inquiry itself; indeed, implicit in criticism of commanders and their campaign decisions are claims that another course taken, another choice made, may have led to a different (and presumably happier) outcome. But here Robinson dives headlong into an elaborate scenario, complete with a detailed sequence of events *as they would have unfolded* had Stuart followed the correct route—screening Lee's army along the slope of the Blue Ridge as it marched north—that well-nigh assured not only decisive Confederate victory in south-central Pennsylvania, but also the collapse of Union political will and the cessation of hostilities. That the Federals possessed something of a voice in military matters of such import seems not to matter much, not when confronted with a Confederate host united in body and (presumably) in mind. All this could have happened had Lee and his army been given the intelligence they needed to fight the battle they were capable of fighting, writes Robinson (166). Of course all this *could* have happened. That it did not had a great deal to do with James Ewell Brown Stuart and his failure to provide R. E. Lee with timely and necessary information as the Pennsylvania campaign unfolded. That it did not too rested upon a myriad of additional factors—military, social, and political—not the least of which was the 92,000 officers and men of the Army of the Potomac.

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