

The Rashness of That Hour: Politics, Gettysburg, and the Downfall of Confederate Brigadier General Alfred Iverson.

Wallace A. Hettle

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Hettle, Wallace A. (2011) "The Rashness of That Hour: Politics, Gettysburg, and the Downfall of Confederate Brigadier General Alfred Iverson.," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 3 , Article 26.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol13/iss3/26>

Review

Hettle, Wallace A.

Summer 2011

Wynstra, Robert J. *The Rashness of That Hour: Politics, Gettysburg, and the Downfall of Confederate Brigadier General Alfred Iverson..* Savas Beatie, \$32.95 ISBN 978-1-932714-88-3

Attempting to Understand a Controversial Confederate Commander

This book has much to recommend it. It is the first book-length exploration of the controversial career of Confederate Brigadier General Alfred Iverson. The book tells a significant story that adds a new dimension to our understanding of the battle of Gettysburg.

Iverson's career melted down at Gettysburg, as significant questions arose about his competence and courage there, especially concerning the fighting of July 1, 1863. Therefore, it makes sense that the heart of the book is a retelling of the Gettysburg Campaign from a new perspective. Long story short: on July 1, 1863, Iverson led from the rear at best. At worst, he acted the part of a coward and shirked his duty. Because of Iverson's inattention to duty, his brigade of North Carolinians was effectively annihilated in fierce fighting on the first day of the battle. Beyond the dreadful human cost involved, Iverson's failure contributed much to the Confederacy's failure to take the high ground outside Gettysburg on the first day of the battle. In a highly unusual move, Confederate leaders stripped Iverson of his command a few short days after the battle.

Wynstra writes smoothly, and his research is exhaustive—the author appears to have scoured much of the United States in search of material. The maps are wonderful, the photographs eye-catching, and best of all, the footnotes are where they belong: at the bottom of the page. This is a book that students of Gettysburg will not want to miss.

Unfortunately, this writer is no expert on Gettysburg, and while reading about the campaign, I sometimes found myself straining to see the big picture.

Wynstra does not explain the importance of the battle concerning the rest of the war, and devotes little energy to explaining just why the meticulously explored events of July 1 matter for the campaign taken as a whole. The assumption appears to be that readers will already know much of the story, and the result is that the author sometimes loses the forest for the trees. It would be unreasonable to expect Wynstra to do the job of Bruce Catton or Stephen Sears, but this book would be stronger if the author kept an eye on the secondary literature and overall context.

Alfred Iverson is an intriguing, if somewhat tragic figure. Wynstra does a good job exploring primary sources, especially letters, for new insights. He finds an extraordinary volume of complaint when the Georgian Iverson was placed over a brigade composed mostly of North Carolinians, as well as numerous hints that things were not well under Iverson in the time leading up to Gettysburg. It also emerges that Iverson's family pulled strings to make him a general. Similarly, connections in Richmond prevented the discharge he should have received after Gettysburg. As a person, though, Iverson remains a bit enigmatic. Given the difficulty in penetrating the fog of war, Wynstra wisely refrains from calling his subject a coward. To do so, one would have to read Iverson's mind.

On one issue, Wynstra fails to investigate fully. On the book's handsome cover, Iverson sports Masonic jewelry, yet the index includes no mention of the Free Masons. This kind of omission suggests that this book might have been strengthened by greater attention to social and cultural history. Similarly, given the book's exploration of failure in battle, a glance at the burgeoning literature on southern manhood would have been in order. Still, this well-written and thoroughly researched book introduces us to an often-ignored facet of Gettysburg and, in doing so, provides a service to specialists on the Civil War's most notable battle.

Wallace A. Hettle is Professor of History at the University of Northern Iowa and is the author of Inventing Stonewall Jackson: A Civil War Hero in History and Memory (LSU Press, 2011).