Gettysburg

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Contents

Introduction	3
Chapter 1: The Many Roads to Gettysburg	12
Chapter 2: The Confederate Invasion, June-July 1863	32
Chapter 3: The Battle, July 1-2	45
Chapter 4: High Tide and Retreat, July 3 and afterwards	69
Chapter 5: Aftermath, 1863-1865	86
Chapter 6: Coming to Terms with Victory and Defeat, c1865-1880	101
Chapter 7: Gettysburg as the Nation’s “Turning Point”, c1880-1933	120
Chapter 8: Gettysburg and the Meaning of America, c1930-1990	143
Epilogue: Gettysburg and American History	161

Introduction

As soon as the guns had fallen silent on July 3, 1863, Gettysburg became a place of the imagination. The three-day battle fought across the gentle ridges around the small Pennsylvania town was the bloodiest encounter of the American Civil War. Farmers and bounty hunters uncovered human remains in the fields for years afterwards. Even today, you can still find bullets.

But it was not only the scale of the violence that bestowed upon this battle a sacred place in American national mythology.[1] The stories told about Gettysburg are the stories of America itself, more intensely so than other hallowed places in the American story, including even the places where the Revolution was fought, or the Constitution was written. The essence of the Gettysburg myth is that here the fate of the republic was determined; here that America was re-consecrated.

Gettysburg has been a vacation resort, a war grave, and a public park, and, more than that, it is, to many, a shrine. Over a century and a half, pilgrims have come to Gettysburg in their millions to remember the dead but also to feel connected to some essential quality of the American experiment. Even those who came to have a good day out were also constructing memories and meaning.

If, like countless visitors before, you stand on Cemetery Ridge, perhaps in the fading light of a summer evening, you will see a blue-tinged range of hills on the western horizon. In front of you, the fields slope gently away towards a road and then rise again to a wooded ridge about a mile in front. In 1964, the writer Norman Cousins went to Gettysburg to interview former president Dwight Eisenhower, who had retired to a farm on the battlefield. “It is difficult,” Cousins wrote, “for the mind to sustain the thought that these quiet fields were once the setting for one of the most violent encounters in history. The blood in the earth runs deep at Gettysburg, but the eye sees only an enchanted land.”[2] Blood and soil: the vital nationalist ingredients of sacred ground. The land is enchanted not just by the beauty of the countryside but by the enchantments of meaning imposed on the field by those who fought there and those who have come after.

Why Gettysburg and not some other battle at some other time? When and why did this happen? The simple answer to the *when* question is Independence Day, July 4, 1863. It was then that it became clear that the battle was over, and the Union Army of the Potomac was victorious. The Confederate Army of Northern Virginia had run out of options after the repulse of Pickett’s Charge on July 3. This was the massive frontal assault on the Union line by around twelve thousand soldiers under the command of three Confederate generals, one of whom was George Pickett. It is a familiar story and one which echoes that of so many other “heroic” failed attacks against well-entrenched defenders, from the charge of the Light Brigade at Balaklava to the ranks of British soldiers advancing towards German machine guns on the first day of the Somme. Having suffered around 30 per cent casualties, any hope

[1] The case for Gettysburg as the principal site of American meaning is made powerfully in Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).
[2] Norman Cousins, "Visit to Gettysburg”, *Saturday Review*, 11 July 1964., p. 18.

of advancing on Baltimore or Washington extinguished, Lee's army began the hazardous business of retreating south, across the flood-swollen Potomac River and back into Virginia. In the following decades, veterans relitigated every tactical and strategic decision in print, in testimony to Congressional hearings, and in valedictory speeches.

The main aim of this book is to offer some answers to the *why* question. In the Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln summed up American exceptionalism: the idea that the United States had a Providential mission to preserve free government everywhere on earth. Similarly, there is also a Gettysburg exceptionalism: the idea that the bloody struggle in those Pennsylvania fields was both different from all other battles while also of universal significance. Gettysburg was the only big battle of the Civil War fought on free soil (Antietam, in September 1862, was fought in a loyal state, but one in which slavery remained legal). People's perception at the time in both North and South was that this mattered greatly. It was one thing for the Union army to invade the South; it was quite another for the rebels to strike into the heart of the free North. Gettysburg became the turning point of turning points, the moment when all was lost and all won. It was the Civil War in miniature: a glorious, storied, tragic tale that was small enough to comprehend but large enough to be inspirational. For all its complexity, understanding Gettysburg was easier than understanding the whole war—or so it seemed. Many people laboured to define what Gettysburg meant, from the town boosters who wanted tourist dollars, the veterans in blue and gray (who often warred among themselves more than with their erstwhile enemies), to self-appointed custodians of the battlefield such as the various agencies of the Federal government and generations of historians, journalists and battlefield guides. The story of how and why Gettysburg has come to matter so much – why it has become an American "shrine" – is a story of many hands, and it has kept rolling on from that Independence Day in 1863 down to the latest generation.

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So much for the battle of the imagination. What of the real-life events? It is a challenge to attempt even the most basic summary of what happened between the first and third of July 1863. One of the most familiar themes in the Gettysburg literature is, paradoxically, its unknowability. It is undoubtedly true that, as Carol Reardon points out, there is contradictory evidence about even such apparently "knowable" facts, such as how long the Confederate artillery bombardment on July 3 lasted. Was it ten minutes or four hours? Confident primary sources can be found to support either.[3] Although hundreds of soldiers left written accounts of their experience at Gettysburg, their recollections are necessarily partial. One rebel soldier confessed after the war to his former commanding officer that "I was very much like the French Soldier of whom you sometimes told us, who never saw anything while the battle was going on except the rump of his fat file leader."[4] The military historian Richard Holmes has argued that for combatants under extreme stress, rightly thinking that each breath could be their last, the human brain "records clips of experience, often in erratic sequence."[5] And even if soldiers could cognitively process what was happening around them, the undulating landscape and the smoke from artillery fire all constrained their vision. Lieutenant Frank Haskell, an aide to a Union General, who wrote one of the most fluent and apparently complete witness accounts, emphasised how difficult it was for anyone – even someone who was there, never mind those who were not – to really know what was going on. "A full

[3] Carol Reardon, "The Pickett's Charge Nobody Knows," in Gabor Boritt, ed., *The Gettysburg Nobody Knows* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 126-7.
[4] John M. Stone to Joseph R. Davis, March 1868, in Ladd and Ladd, *Bachelder Papers,* 1: 328.
[5] Holmes, *Acts of War,* p. 175.

account of the battle *as it was* will never, can never be made," he wrote. "Who could sketch the changes, the constant shifting of the bloody panorama? It is not possible."[6]

Politics compounded the fog of war. Veterans feuded over which commanders should take credit or blame. Later, they fought over the design and placement of the monuments that sprouted like spring flowers across the battlefield. The Civil War generation cared deeply about inscribing the correct version of history on the landscape, identifying the precise spot at which storied events occurred. One modern historian has been driven to conclude that "our knowledge of Gettysburg [is] a collection of changing and varying opinions manipulated intentionally or unwittingly by thousands of veterans and historians alike."[7] As the military historian Clare Makepeace pointed out, individuals recall episodes in their past differently depending on what happened next. That is especially true of soldiers who survive wars. Indeed, as Makepeace also says, drawing on research by psychologists, "the principal function of a memory may not even be to record the past, but to enable an individual to generate meaning in life in the present."[8]

Nevertheless, with those caveats in mind, here are the barest bones of the story: In June 1863, Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia advanced into Pennsylvania. It was the first time in the war that an entire rebel army had invaded a free state. (Lee had marched into Maryland the previous September and fought a major battle at Antietam, but, although it had not seceded from the Union, Maryland was still a slaveholding state, and no one, before the war, would have regarded it as anything other than Southern.) On July 1, two Confederate brigades arrived in the South-Central Pennsylvania town of Gettysburg from the northwest, where they were surprised to be met by stiff resistance from Union cavalry. Both armies rushed units to the scene. After heavy fighting, the rebels drove the Union forces out of the town and onto the higher ground of Cemetery Hill, in normal times a fifteen-minute walk up a gentle gradient. Overnight, Union reinforcements arrived and, making the most of the topography, extended the defensive line southwards for about a mile along a ridge. Eventually, the Union line was in a shape often referred to as a "fishhook", curling from Culp's Hill and Cemetery Hill in the north toward the rocky mound of Little Round Top at the southern end. The Confederates, meanwhile took up their position along Seminary Ridge, which ran north-south in parallel to Cemetery Ride. The stage was therefore set for a set piece battle between armies that eyed each other across two-thirds of a mile of farmland.

The next day, July 2, Lee ordered assaults on the Union's right and left flanks. There were some successes—especially in an area where the Union line formed a salient—but, despite heavy losses, the Confederates did not break the Union lines as Lee had hoped. It was on July 2 that some of the most famous episodes of the battle took place, including the desperate Union defence of Little Round Top, which anchored the Union's left flank.

On the third day, July 3, at around 1 pm, the rebels launched a massive artillery bombardment designed to soften Union defences, after which came the infantry assault on the Federal centre that has gone down in history as Pickett's Charge, one of the great military disasters of modern history. Confederate soldiers advanced slowly up the gentle slope towards the low line of stones where Union troops waited. As they clambered over fences, with only the

[6] Frank A. Haskell, *The Battle of Gettysburg* (Madison: Wisconsin History Commission, 1908), p. 181.
[7] Thomas A. Desjardin, *These Honored Dead: How the Story of Gettysburg Shaped American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2003), 126.
[8] Clare Makepeace, *Captives of War: British Prisoners of War in Europe in the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 24.

occasional dip in the land to obscure them from the sight of the defenders, artillery and rifle fire ripped into them. A few hundred attackers breached the Union line, but they were soon overwhelmed. One Union General described Pickett's Charge as "that famous scene which made the battle of Gettysburg more dramatic than any other event of the Civil War, and which more nearly approximates the conception of what a battle is in the imagination of persons who have never seen one."[9] The mid-twentieth century's best-selling Civil War historian, Bruce Catton, wrote of Pickett's Charge in an elegiac tone: "There it was, for the last time in this war, perhaps for the last time anywhere, the grand pageantry of war in the old style: beautiful and majestic and terrible."[10]

It sometimes seems, however, that what happened at Gettysburg is less important than what did not. There are many "what ifs": if Jeb Stuart's cavalry had provided better intelligence, Lee might have avoided a full-scale engagement on such unpromising terrain; if the overly-cautious General Richard Ewell had ordered an assault on the reeling Union troops gathering on Culp's Hill on the evening of the first day, perhaps the Union army would never have secured so strong a defensive position; if Longstreet had organised the assault on the second day with less tardiness perhaps the rebels could have secured Little Round Top before it was properly defended, or possibly A. P. Hill and Ewell's Corps had supported Longstreet more energetically, the second day's attacks might have broken the Union lines. In 1953 the science fiction writer Ward Moore published *Bring the Jubilee,* a novel set in an alternative universe in which the Confederacy had won the "War of Southron Independence", as it became known, simply by occupying Little Round Top before Union troops did so. (In Moore's novel the protagonist travels back in time and changes the course of history to our own by accidentally delaying the Confederate advance.)[11]

And then there's the final "what if": if only Pickett had not charged. Or if he did charge, if only it had succeeded—if he had been better supported, or if the rebel artillery had wrought more destruction on Union defences, or (as Winston Churchill imagined in a 1931 exercise in counterfactual history), if Stuart's cavalry had attacked from the rear causing panic in the Union's left flank—in other words, if the Yankees had not somehow spoiled the script by holding firm.[12]

The most hallowed places on the battlefield are those where the battle seemed to turn, such as the copse of trees and the "bloody angle", which marked the focus of Pickett's charge. In recent decades, those legendary spots have been rivalled in popularity by the hitherto little-visited monument to the 20th Maine. This is due to the influence of Michael Shaara's novel *The Killer Angels* (1974) and the film *Gettysburg* (1993), based on Shaara's book, which turned the colonel of that Maine regiment, Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, into the man who saved the Union by holding the extreme left flank against superior numbers. Chamberlain was a gifted writer and a decent officer, but his responsibility for the outcome on Little Round Top has often been exaggerated. Today, the licensed battlefield guides dampen visitors' often overblown assumptions about Chamberlain's role. Still, the image of Chamberlain ordering a bayonet counter-charge down the slope of Little Round Top, like the futile heroism of Pickett's charge or the foot-dragging of Longstreet, has become what

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[9] Schurz, *Reminiscences,* Vol. 3, p. 31.
[10] Catton, *Glory Road,* p.
[11] Ward Moore, *Bring the Jubilee* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1953).
[12] Winston Churchill, "If Lee Had had not won the Battle of Gettysburg," *Scribner's Magazine* (December 1930): 587-596.

Gettysburg “means” to millions of people. Through these moments and these heroic characters, the battle has become a lived experience for millions who were not there.

Chamberlain was one of the thousands of veterans on both sides who laboured to secure Gettysburg’s place not just as the pre-eminent battle of the Civil War but as one of the decisive moments in world history. “The theatre and the play were well matched,” proclaimed John C. Black, the colonel of the 37th Illinois Infantry Regiment, as he surveyed the battlefield in 1885. “On those commanding heights, and sheltered by those now silent groves, stretched out in grim and deadly opposition the gathered hosts of kindred yet warring men. Here, as at Marathon, as at Cannae, as at Waterloo, destiny brought two great causes together and bade them struggle for the mastery of the world and the guidance of the future.”[13] Like the Major-General in *The Pirates of Penzance* who boasted that he could “quote the fights historical from Marathon to Waterloo in order categorical,” Black was no doubt consciously or unconsciously influenced by the best-selling 1851 book *Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World: From Marathon to Waterloo*, by Sir Edward Creasy which explained world history through these great military turning points. Sure enough, when a new edition of Creasy’s book was published in 1899 in New York, it included an additional chapter on the 1863 struggle in Pennsylvania written by John Gilmer Speed, a former *New York World* editor. Gettysburg had achieved immortality as one of the “fights historical.” “Confederate hope was not utterly destroyed” by defeat at Gettysburg, wrote Gilmer; but, had it gone the other way, “Union hope would have been destroyed.” And therefore, “Gettysburg was one of the great decisive battles of the world.”[14]

It is intoxicating, that fantasy of alternative endings. Our imaginations are fired by the idea of a single turning point so profound that the destiny of nations lies in the balance. The Southern novelist William Faulkner captured the yearning especially well:

> For every Southern boy fourteen years old, not once but whenever he wants it, there is the instant when it’s still not yet two o’clock on that July afternoon in 1863; the brigades are in position behind the rail fence, the guns are laid and ready in the woods, and the furled flags are already loosened to break out and Pickett himself with his long oiled ringlets and his hat in one hand probably and his sword in the other looking up the hill waiting for Longstreet to give the word and it’s all in the balance, it hasn’t happened yet, it hasn’t even begun yet, it not only hasn’t begun yet but there is still time for it not to begin against that position and in those circumstances which made more men than Garnett and Kemper and Armistead and Wilcox look grave yet it’s going to begin, we all know that, we have come too far with too much at stake and that moment doesn’t need even a fourteen year old boy to think *This time*. *Maybe this time* with all this much to lose and all this much to gain: Pennsylvania, Maryland, the world, the golden dome of Washington itself to crown with desperate and unbelievable victory the desperate gamble.[15]

This famous passage may be overwrought, but it captures something essential about the public memory of Gettysburg. We all know “it’s going to begin” not just because with the benefit of hindsight we know it *did*, but because having got to that stage—with the furled flags loosened—the actors were trapped in a logical sequence of events of their own making.

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[13] General John C. Black, “The Battle’s Lesson,” speech delivered at Gettysburg on May 4, 1885, reprinted in the *National Tribune*, May 28, 1885.

[14] Sir Edward Creasy, *Decisive Battles of the World, with a special introduction and supplementary chapters by John Gilmer Speed* (New York: Colonial Press, 1988), 406.

[15] William Faulkner, *Intruder in the Dust.* Vintage Book ed. (New York: Vintage Press, 1972), 194-5.

The "might-have-beens" at Gettysburg are made more, not less, compelling by the simultaneous, if paradoxical, sense that fate was almost—*almost*—inescapable. If Gettysburg is the ultimate fantasy "turning point" of the American Civil War, it is one in which the chances of an alternative outcome were tantalisingly small. Could Lee really have acted any differently on July 3, given Meade's decision to remain on the field after resisting Confederate assaults on July 2? And could Lee have really done anything other than ordering those assaults on July 2—notwithstanding the unpromising terrain—with an army that was in high spirits and had (once again) just sent Union troops scattering in semi-disorder? Could Lee have avoided a full-scale engagement on July 1, once first contact had been made? One could go back further—did Lee have better alternatives than taking his army into Pennsylvania? If the answer to these questions is "probably not", then in retrospect, the rebel armies were trapped in circumstances in which their chances of victory were vanishingly small. With hindsight, perhaps the battle's outcome was foreordained by the end of the first day, when the Union army, having been ignominiously driven through the town, found itself, as much by luck as by design, in an enviable defensive position.

This is the essence of the "lost cause" myth: the idea that the war was nobly fought by brave Southern men against odds that were, if not impossible, then almost so. And it is a feeling captured in the idea that the battle marked the "high water mark" of the rebellion. As the millions of visitors to the Gettysburg battlefield over the years know, the "high water mark" is also a literal place—the portion of Cemetery Ridge near the angle in a low stone boundary wall where Confederate soldiers in General Lewis Armistead's brigade of Pickett's Division breached the Union defences, only to be captured or killed. The term "high water mark" was coined by John Bachelder, an eccentric and indefatigable early historian of Gettysburg, of whom we will hear more later. "It was here," Bachelder wrote, in the first tourist guide to the battlefield, "that one of the most gallant charges recorded in history terminated: here that the tide of success of the Confederacy turned; from this spot the defeated troops fell back, and never again made a successful stand. This was indeed 'the high-water mark of the rebellion!'"[16] Tides, of course, always turn: the water always recedes even if it doesn't look as if it will.

The allure of the "if only" Faulknerian fantasy proved so alluring that the losing side has probably received more attention over the years than the victors. They have certainly been far more thoroughly romanticised. For most of the last century and a half, the image of Gettysburg as the "high-water mark" of the rebellion, with all the neo-Confederate romance that idea conjures, has over-shadowed the Lincolnian image of Gettysburg as the site of a "new birth of freedom." If Gettysburg was where the "tide" of the Confederacy began to ebb, then it was where the nation was saved. No wonder the battle's tale, told and retold in a thousand voices, has become the stuff of legend.

At the dedication of the National Cemetery at Gettysburg in November 1863, the renowned orator Edward Everett concluded his two-hour address with the prediction that wheresoever the accounts of the war were read, "down to the latest syllable of recorded time," there will be "no brighter page than that which records THE BATTLE OF GETTYSBURG."[17] So far, at least, his prediction has been borne out. No other Civil War battle matches Gettysburg's status in the national consciousness. Gettysburg has been the site of demonstrations by Civil

[16] John B. Bachelder, *Gettysburg: What to See and How to See it,* 9th ed. (Boston: John B. Bachelder, 1889), 94.
[17] Edward Everett, *Orations and Speeches on Various Occasions* (4 vols. Boston: Little, Brown, 1878-79), 4: 659.

Rights leaders and present-day white supremacists, a place of pilgrimage for history buffs and the ultimate stage-set for re-enactors. About no other clash of arms have so many Americans cared so much.

It is impossible to delineate precisely how much this is due to the battle itself and how much to the battle's chief early interpreter, Abraham Lincoln, whose brief "address" followed Everett's great oration at the ceremonies to consecrate the new burial place for the Union dead. In just nine elegantly constructed sentences, Lincoln set out a compelling rationale for the cause for which the fallen soldiers of the Union had given their "last full measure of devotion." That cause, Lincoln said, was to give the nation a "new birth of freedom" and, more than that, to ensure that "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." The stakes could not have been higher: if the Civil War was a conflict to determine whether government based on the proposition of "equality" could exist, and if this battle was the greatest battle of the war, then it mattered to the "whole family of man" (as Lincoln put it in another speech) that the tide was turned back. For Lincoln, the Union's effort to suppress the slaveholder's insurgency was part of a global Manichean struggle between democracy and autocracy—slaveholders were the American manifestation of mankind's dark impulse to dominate. Russia had a Tsar; the US had spawned the Slave Power. In substance, there was nothing that Lincoln said at Gettysburg that he hadn't said before, but the way he said it ensured that his speech – and therefore the battle -- belonged to the ages.

1865 was as significant a caesura in the historical experience for white and black southerners as was 1945 for mainland Europe. But in another sense, the war matters not because it created a new world but because it ratified the status quo: reaffirming the American Union as the indispensable carrier of liberty. In global terms, it was the thwarting of what most northerners saw as the rebellion against the best government on earth—the closure of a diabolical alternative path—that mattered.

So, why did Gettysburg become the ultimate representation of the war and, in a larger, Lincolnian sense, of the Manichean struggle between liberty and despotism? Some of the answer lies in Gettysburg's "what if" quality. For it to matter that the stakes were high, it must be possible to imagine an alternative ending. This points us to the key to Gettysburg's cultural significance as the most legible moment when the war might have gone either way. If, for the South, Pickett's charge was the high-water mark of their cause, for Northerners, accepting the same logic, this was the moment, above all, when all could have been lost.

J. R. R. Tolkien argued that fairy stories could provide moral or emotional consolation because of their very particular type of happy ending: a sudden turn of events which prevents the protagonist from meeting some terrible and very plausible fate.[18] He coined the neologism "eucatastrophe"—a good catastrophe. Good or bad, it is in the imagined contingency of battle that the drama resides. Gettysburg was the battle in which the contending forces of the 1860s seemed, in retrospect, to have been most similar. They were armies of white men fighting for noble and, with retrospective paradox, apparently compatible ends. Although by July 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation had come into effect, Black troops did not play a role in the battle, and if one ignored the enslavement of Pennsylvanians by Confederate armies (a wilful memory-lapse that was near-universal among white people), it was possible to relegate the issue of slavery to some distant arena, as if it had no direct bearing on the fight. Gettysburg

[18] J. R. R, Tolkein, "On Fairy-Stories" in C. S. Lewis, ed., *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (London, 1947).

was also removed in time and place from the more problematic memory of the relentless and bloody bloody-mindedness of Grant's overland campaign in 1864. And so, this battle—like no other—could easily be remembered as the last and greatest of the romantic clashes between two well-balanced sides, testing the martial virtues of courage and valour as if it had been the field of Marathon or Waterloo.

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Is it an exaggeration to claim, as many have done, that Gettysburg was the most important battle of the Civil War? Probably. In a war that sprawled across a continent and was to continue for almost two years afterwards, it is a stretch to claim this battle as the singular turning point. Military historians typically argue that the Union army's capture, after a long siege, of the river town of Vicksburg, Mississippi, on July 4—the day after the battle in Pennsylvania concluded—was a more serious blow to the rebellion. The fall of Vicksburg gave the United States control of the Mississippi river, cutting off Texas and the rebel-held areas of Louisiana and Arkansas from the rest of the Confederacy. Gettysburg's prominence is grist to the mill for military historians who chafe at how far the eastern theatre of war attracts a disproportionate amount of attention compared to the battles in the west.

Yet Gettysburg did matter for much the reason that the battle's postbellum boosters said it did: had the Union army been defeated, the political consequences would have been dire, in a way that would not have been the case had Grant failed to break through at Vicksburg. It is true that we cannot understand the strategic weakness of the Confederacy if we are too distracted by General Lee's dashing campaigns in Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania. But it is also true that after Gettysburg, Lee could never again be seen as invincible. Never again did his army march on Northern soil. Never again did northerners *en masse* feel vulnerable to invasion. The insurgency continued but never again posed the same military threat to the national state.

In any case, Gettysburg will matter so long as it remains the largest battle ever fought in North America. Of the seventy-five thousand Confederates, 22,600 (30 per cent) were killed or injured. The toll of general officers was appalling: six dead, eight wounded, and three captured. Just as significantly, the Southern field grade officers suffered high casualties, and their absence would be felt for the duration of the war. Of the 83,300 Union troops at Gettysburg, 17,700 (21 per cent) were killed or wounded.

This book explains why a battle came to be fought here, why it ended how it did, and what it has meant ever since. I do not claim to be comprehensive, but I have sketched out the main topographical features of the Gettysburg story. Chapters 1 to 3 explain the origins of the war, why the contending armies came to be at Gettysburg and provide an outline of the fighting over the three days. In doing so, I outline some of the major areas of controversy, not only about the wisdom of command decisions but also about what actually happened—although there are, as I will argue, aspects of the battle that remain forever unknowable despite the mountain of writing on the subject. On Confederate leadership (or the failures thereof), I should declare up front that I think that in the end, neither the lack of cohesion nor Lee's apparent overconfidence were in themselves fatal. On this vexed question, I find myself in broad agreement with General Pickett, who, when asked by reporters why the Confederacy lost, is often quoted as having replied, "I've always thought the Yankees had something to do with it." (Though fittingly, for a battle so encrusted with myths, there is no good evidence

that he ever said such a thing.)[19] Chapter 4 explains the immediate impact of the battle on those who experienced it, in the armies, in the town and further afield. Chapter 5 covers Lincoln's visit to Gettysburg and assesses what his address meant and how it has mattered. Chapters 6 and 7 explain how Northerners and Southerners fought over the meaning of the battle (not least among themselves) during the decades when veterans worked to inscribe their meanings on the battlefield itself through monuments and markers. The final chapter and the Epilogue discuss the importance of Gettysburg in American culture in the decades since the 1930s, years during which the Ku Klux Klan rallied there, and Civil Rights leaders prayed there.

This is the story of a battle that has acquired meanings far beyond the purely military. Gettysburg is the most famous small town in America and the most American small town. As a place and an event, it has become a repository of the values and ideals different groups of Americans have wished to place upon it. Accounts of the battle often begin with the observation that these two vast armies clashed there because all the roads in the region converged in the centre of the town. Similarly, it so often seems that all investigations into what the United States is and has been led, and still lead, in one way or another, through Gettysburg.

[19] For various renderings of this quote and debate about its veracity, see: James M. McPherson, "American Victory, American Defeat", in Gabor S. Boritt, ed. *Why the Confederacy Lost* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 19; George C. Rable, *God's Almost Chosen People: A Religious History of the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: Universit of North Carolina Press, 2010), 397; Thomas A. Desjardin, *These Honored Dead: How the Story of Gettysburg Shaped American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2003), 124.

End of Excerpt

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