

Gettysburg: The Meade-Sickles Controversy

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Review

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Sauers, Richard A. *Gettysburg: The Meade-Sickles Controversy*. Brassey's, Inc., \$24.95 ISBN 1574884883

Separate strategies

Scholar compares diverse approaches to analyzing battle

This year being the 140th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg, several new books on the battle are being published. Two of them are **Gettysburg: The Meade-Sickles Controversy**, by Richard A. Sauers, and **The Stand of the Union Army at Gettysburg**, by Jeffrey C. Hall. The two books, and the two authors, are very different. Sauers's book focuses on an important but narrow aspect of the battle, whereas Hall's addresses the entire battle and campaign. Sauers is a professional historian; Hall is a biologist whose fascination with Gettysburg has led him to teach a regular class on the battle at Brandeis University.

Sauers has written four previous books on the Civil War, including *A Caspian Sea of Ink: The Meade-Sickles Controversy* in 1989. His present book may be considered the last word on the subject.

On the second day of the battle, Gen. Daniel Sickles advanced his Third Corps a half mile forward of the position of the general line of the Army of the Potomac along Cemetery Ridge. The attack by Longstreet and Hill's Corps of the Army of Northern Virginia upon the Union left flank therefore fell on Sickles's corps. Defending the now-famous Peach Orchard, Wheatfield, and Devil's Den, the Third Corps resisted valiantly along a line too long for the number of troops in the corps, but was chewed up by Confederate assaults. The most famous of those assaults was upon Little Round Top, which had been exposed by Sickles's advance, and which was rescued for the Union cause by troops from the Fifth Corps. Sickles's advanced line was bolstered by reinforcements and counterattacks by elements of the Second and Fifth corps, but the piecemeal

nature of their arrival assured that large numbers of Union troops would become casualties. But also assured was the wearing out and repulse of the Confederate offensive along the whole line except in and around Devil's Den.

The Meade-Sickles controversy revolves around two questions: Did Sickles disobey his orders by moving his corps; and did the move turn out to be beneficial for the Union army? Sickles claimed that his corps absorbed the Confederate attack, causing it to run out of steam before it reached the Cemetery Ridge line. In fact, when asked why there was no monument to Sickles at Gettysburg, the old general replied, The whole damn battlefield is my monument. Others have not been so sure that Sickles was the Savior of Gettysburg, but maintain instead that his insubordination not only brought about excessive casualties but nearly led to disaster for the Army of the Potomac.

Sickles was not a professional soldier, but was a politician whose unsavory personal behavior guaranteed his being involved in controversy. About two months before Gettysburg, Sickles was ordered to abandon some high ground around Chancellorsville. Upon his doing so, Gen. Robert E. Lee's artillery occupied the high ground and subjected the center of the Union line to destructive fire. Now, at Gettysburg, Sickles looked forward from the position assigned his corps along the lower end of Cemetery Ridge, and saw that a peach orchard along the Emmitsburg Road was considerably higher than his own position. Wanting to avoid another Chancellorsville, Sickles moved forward, even though he had no orders to do so. The new line was 50% longer than the line he had been assigned, and his move uncovered the left anchor of the Union line at Little Round Top. Later, Sickles claimed that he had received no orders from Meade, and also that his idea had been to defend Little Round Top from a position forward of it (Devil's Den).

Sauers assembles what appears to be all possible evidence on all sides of the controversy (with the egregious exception of the essay *The Chances of War in The Gettysburg Nobody Knows*, ed. by Gabor S. Boritt, by an author whose name modesty forbids me to mention.) Not only is the evidence thorough; Sauers's conclusions are persuasive. Sauers shows clearly that Maj. Gen. George Gordon Meade, the commander of the Army of the Potomac, gave specific and clear orders to Sickles to position his corps along lower Cemetery Ridge and man Little Round Top, and he communicated the order to Sickles several times. Sickles's claim not to have received specific orders is shown to have been a lie--not necessarily unexpected from a man who was the first to claim temporary

insanity in an American trial (Sickles shot a man for dallying with his wife), was the first to be acquitted on those grounds, and after the trial was said to have boasted, I meant to kill him.

Secondly, Sauers shows that Sickles's movement forward had not been to the Union army's advantage. Citing General Humphreys (an excellent and reliable soldier) on page 135, Sauers summarizes Humphrey's conclusions regarding the error in Sickles's advance: the Cemetery Ridge line was a better defensive position than the Peach Orchard line, the Peach Orchard's prominence was a glaring weakness in the new position, Sickles did not have enough men to defend the line he chose, and the new position was too far from the rest of the army to be supported efficiently.

Gettysburg: The Meade-Sickles Controversy follows the postwar arguments posited by both sides; it also deals with Sickles's claim that his move prevented Meade from ordering the Army of the Potomac to retreat. In refuting the latter red herring, Sauers properly defends Meade as being not only competent, but courageous, decisive, and determined. Sauers's text is a satisfying book in that it seizes a specific issue, thoroughly lays out the evidence, and draws clear, definite, and well-argued conclusions. Some readers will find themselves somewhat annoyed by what becomes almost a refrain of disparagement of previous historians, beginning on the first page of the book, for their shoddy scholarship regarding this issue. These comments continue to the very last page of the book. Perhaps the denunciations should have been reserved solely for Sickles instead, the self-aggrandizing insubordinate who claimed I simply advanced out on to the battlefield and seized Longstreet by the throat and held him there, and who was not above lying nor above trying to trash the reputation of a decent and effective commanding general in order save his own.

A much larger book, covering a much larger subject, is Hall's **The Stand of the Union Army at Gettysburg**. That Dr. Hall is a scientist by training and not a historian is not necessarily a bad thing, as some of the more effective writers of Civil War history have been non-professionals; moreover, Hall's scientific mind enables him to approach the subject with clarity of thought and a merciless orderliness reflected in 168 maps and 115 charts. Indeed, the maps and charts are what first strike the reader. The book is presented in an enlarged, coffee-table size to accommodate the extraordinary profusion of cartographic visuals. Hall wants readers to be very clear about which units were a part of which organizations, where and how they were positioned, and where they moved. The

focus of this text ranges from the macroscopic to the minute. Obviously, this is a strength of the book; it is exactly the kind of thing that Civil War students (who write and read reviews of Civil War books) want. However, such graphic detail is not for everybody, so one also must focus on the text of **The Stand**.

The text offers several appreciable strengths. One is that we finally have a book whose purpose is not to analyze Confederate mistakes as a way of understanding the battle. Hall writes on page xix that . . . Gettysburg was a battle that was *not* sitting there for the Confederates to win or lose. . . .The Southerners did not flounder at Gettysburg; they were outfought. Probably the best brief analysis of the battle was given by one of the most qualified persons for making such an analysis: General George Pickett. When asked why the Army of Northern Virginia lost the battle, the general said that he thought the Yankees had had something to do with it. It is time that we have a book which creates an argument in support of Pickett's conclusion.

While such a thesis will raise the blood pressure of Southern sympathizers, it is difficult to resist Hall's conclusion, especially in the best section of his book, the description of Pickett's Charge. Hall shows that, first of all, the charge was not a desperate, ad hoc affair; it had a chance of succeeding. On July 3, hours were devoted to careful planning and dispositions. Avoiding high ground and the visibility it entailed, Longstreet, Pickett, and others divided the roughly 13,000 men into two wings--one placed behind the ridge line, in the trees, directly across from the objective point of the attack: the famous Copse of Trees (which Hall tells us, interestingly, contained at least 200 trees at the time of the battle.) Pickett's Division was quietly placed much closer to Union lines: very near the Emmitsburg Road, hidden in a long depression. However, these men were far south of the Copse of Trees, and in order to arrive there at the same time as Pettigrew's and Trimble's men, the Virginians had to march to their left, face front, then face left, several times. This called for both precision and courage. Although Hall tells us that many of the rebels turned back, the carefully planned advance produced the desired result of an overwhelming force at a narrow point of penetration.

It was an *active Union defense* that not only repelled, but shattered the charge. Rather than passively awaiting the shock of encounter, Union units on both flanks of Pickett's long lines moved forward, enveloped the attackers, and enfiladed their lines, not only decimating many Confederate units but forcing the rebel advance to funnel into a disorganized crowd. Then the small penetration

achieved by the Confederates was promptly and vigorously counterattacked. Battlefield guides have long given visitors a justifiably admiring picture of the courage of Pickett's men; now perhaps the even greater courage of the relatively few Union defenders who stood their ground in front of the Copse of Trees will also be given its due.

In this reviewer's opinion, the best single piece of writing and argument in the book is the appendix dealing with the lethality of Civil War small arms. Hall argues persuasively that the standard explanation of high casualties is wrong--namely, that Civil War officers stupidly followed outdated Napoleonic tactics after the invention of the rifled musket and minnie ball, which could inflict casualties at much greater distance and with more accuracy than could the old smoothbore and ball. Someone previous to Dr. Hall should have pointed out that losses in the Napoleonic wars were not less than losses in the Civil War. But the main argument made in Hall's appendix is concerned with the difference between the theoretical accuracy and the battlefield accuracy of weapons that had to be sighted, loaded in a cumbersome way, and fired with insensitive triggers. This is an important appendix.

On the less than positive side, this reviewer awaits a second edition of the book. Many readers will find the first two-thirds of the text to be unpleasantly abstract in a game-board sense, and will get punchy from the many maps. While Dr. Hall tells readers at the outset that the book will be a narrative, it is less a narrative of the battle than a highly detailed diagram of the battle. Most of the really interesting narrative details lie in the endnotes. As writing teachers are fond of saying, a narrative must show, not tell. In another edition, perhaps much of the endnote material will be brought forward into the text. Writing teachers also tell you, don't talk about what you are writing, just write it. At some points it feels like the subject of the book is the book itself, rather than the battle, with too many references to what has been said, and what will be said. Finally, a second edition will improve the book stylistically. Those interested in the *story* of Gettysburg will be more satisfied with Stephen Sears's new *Gettysburg*.

But Hall's careful research and diagramming will continue to be an excellent reference for a long time to come, and perhaps it will also correct something more important than erroneous details of troop movements: the point of view which says that the battle of Gettysburg was lost by the Confederates, rather than won by the Union Army.

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