

Gettysburg: Memory, Market, and an American Shrine

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Review

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Weeks, Jim *Gettysburg: Memory, Market, and an American Shrine*. Princeton University Press, \$29.95 ISBN 691102716

Paying Homage

Scholar identifies commercial roots of battlefield's development

For Americans, all roads lead to Gettysburg. As the site of one of the Civil War's most pivotal battles and the most famous speech in American history, Gettysburg has come to mean many different things to different people since the defeat of General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia at the small crossroads town in July 1863. Some of those things touch the very soul of what it means to be an American. Others reflect the base elements of American crassness, commercialism, and opportunism. Jim Weeks, a scholar-in-residence at the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, traces the rise of Gettysburg as a shrine and a commercial "heritage" attraction in this book.

From the start, this book is fraught with problems. Weeks relegates existing scholarship on the place Gettysburg has occupied in the American mind and heart to footnotes. Thus the pathbreaking work of Amy J. Kinsel, John S. Patterson, William C. Davis, Kathleen Georg Harrison, Edward T. Linenthal, Carol Reardon, and others gets short shrift as Weeks claims, on p. 6, that "few articles and no books in the twentieth century have been dedicated to Gettysburg's development as an American shrine." Weeks declares that these works "have merit, but tend to read the past backward." Commendably his own scholarship is based on prodigious research; he has dug deeply to unearth an impressive array of primary and secondary sources.

Weeks examines the rise of Gettysburg's tourist commerce within the framework of the sacred versus the secular, the shrine versus the popular attraction. This dichotomy does not work because, as Weeks admits, the sacred and the profane have been blurred ever since the last bullet was fired at

Gettysburg. But Gettysburg is a far more complicated place than Weeks allows, and its history, whether specifically related to the Civil War battle that occurred there or to the events that otherwise have shaped the borough and Adams County in central Pennsylvania, consists of multiple layers that defy oversimplification. Undaunted by these complexities, Weeks forges ahead in his black-and-white examination of the commercial forces that have, since the time of the battle, turned Gettysburg into a place, as he says on pp. 221-222, that "has devolved from national shrine to family shrine to individual shrine." He concludes that Gettysburg in the twenty-first century is important to modern Americans because it "combines play and memory for those who have opted to prolong games of youth into adulthood."

The book suffers, too, from Weeks's failure to organize his material effectively. His analysis is laid out in four sections that are meant chronologically to explore Gettysburg's development: as a genteel summer resort, 1863-1884; as a mecca for veterans and patriots, 1884-1920; as a family vacation destination, 1920-1970; and as gathering place and focal point for various "image tribes" (i.e., interest groups) that have a stake in Gettysburg, 1970-2000. Unfortunately Weeks jumps back and forth, frustrating his attempts at strict chronological treatment and ensuring needless repetition. In part four, for instance, chapters 7 and 8 cover much of the same ground, and there are passages in chapter 8 that seem to belong in chapter 7, and vice versa. His account of Paul Philippoteaux's Cyclorama painting, which was first exhibited in 1884, is sprinkled throughout the entire book.

Weeks has been poorly served by his editors. One of many baffling statements made throughout the book is found on page 121: "Monuments desiccate memory within an object; switching the burden of memory from artifice to landscape, however, requires space and swells the scope of memory as far as the horizon." I simply don't know how monuments dehydrate memory "within an object."

Throughout the book, Weeks implicates anyone who has had anything at all to do with the development of Gettysburg as a preserved Civil War battlefield, a commercial enterprise, or both. He condemns the efforts of David McConaughy, an attorney from Gettysburg who was responsible for purchasing the first parcels of land that would become part of the battlefield park. He condemns the work of the Gettysburg Battlefield Memorial Association, the local organization that took the first steps to create the park. He condemns the veterans who raised

monuments across the battlefield to honor their deeds. He condemns the War Department commissioners who held the first federal stewardship over the park. He condemns the National Park Service, which has administered the park since the early 1930s. He condemns the Gettysburg Battlefield Preservation Association that spearheaded the late twentieth-century campaign to protect the battlefield from commercial development. He condemns the Friends of the National Parks at Gettysburg, another modern preservation group, for its collusion with the National Park Service. He condemns Main Street Gettysburg, an organization founded in the 1990s to promote the history of the borough and increase visitation to the town. He condemns Philippoteaux for painting the famous Cyclorama. He condemns Richard Neutra, the architect, for designing the building that presently houses the Cyclorama. He condemns modern artists (who go unnamed) for painting romantic scenes of the battle. He condemns re-enactors for playing soldiers. And he condemns the tourists who hope to "experience" something of the Civil War during their visits to Gettysburg and keep their kids entertained at the same time. Essentially he asserts that these individuals and institutions have helped to desecrate (or is it desiccate?) Gettysburg, the sacred shrine. But he never hints at how Americans could have responded any differently to Gettysburg in their time and place or how the battlefield could have been preserved as a pure, undefiled temple. Weeks leaves us wondering whether anything could have been done there that would have been appropriate.

Glenn W. LaFantasie is the author of many articles about Gettysburg and of two forthcoming books: Gettysburg Requiem: The Life of William C. Oates (Oxford University Press) and Twilight at Little Round Top (John Wiley & Sons).