

Hallowed Ground: A Walk at Gettysburg

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Review

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McPherson, James M. *Hallowed Ground: A Walk at Gettysburg*. Crown Publishers, \$16.00 ISBN 609610236

On the Battlefield

Scholar illustrates trek through sacred space

The combination of the country's preeminent Civil War historian writing about the most famous battle in American history would it seems, produce an irresistible book. The result is **Hallowed Ground, A Walk at Gettysburg** by James M. McPherson, the Pulitzer Prize winning author of *Battle Cry of Freedom* (1988) and a Princeton University professor of history. This slim volume is part of the publisher's Crown Journeys series and consists of a prologue, three chapters (one devoted to each day of the battle) and an epilogue. Obviously the book is not designed to be a scholarly study, but instead provides a brief overview of this famous engagement, and that is exactly what McPherson delivers.

By using a fast-paced and easily understood writing style, McPherson skillfully conveys the important and well-known events of the campaign along with a thorough, yet fairly concise overview of the movements and actions of the opposing armies during all three days of the battle. McPherson's use of well-chosen quotes from eyewitnesses greatly strengthens the main text, bringing the story to life and adding a human element to it.

McPherson also skillfully interweaves other topics of interest throughout his battle narrative, such as the preservation of the battlefield, the great reunions, the stories behind the monuments, the history of the park, and accounts of his own experiences at Gettysburg. He also does an excellent job of relating how the memory of the battle and its deeper meanings has evolved throughout the intervening decades by placing Gettysburg in the greater context of American and world history.

There are, however, some problems with various aspects of the book. The first of these connects directly with the book's subtitle, *A Walk at Gettysburg*. At first glance (especially based on the description that appears on the dust jacket) the work appears to be a guided tour of the battlefield. Much of the narrative, however, reads as if the book is only meant to provide a mental walk through the famous landscape. In some sections the text provides detailed directions from stop to stop (including the use of distances and state route numbers), while other directions between certain landmarks are vague or even non-existent. If the book is actually meant to be a guide, then the tour is not a Walk, the total distance covered being over 25 miles in length. If used as such it can also be unsafe, as some of the locations mentioned in the tour are along busy state roads, yet the text provides no safety messages or warnings. The accompanying maps may lessen this problem, though this seems doubtful. The uncorrected proof used for this review only contained placeholders within the text but not the actual maps themselves, thus making it impossible to judge their effectiveness. As there will only be three maps, it is hard to imagine how they could include both troop movements and directions from stop to stop and still illuminate the main narrative. This review copy also contained only one illustration.

McPherson also takes on and successfully debunks some of the supposed myths associated with the battle. These include the famous Spangler's Spring fraternization tale and the Meade/July 2nd Council of War story (which states that Meade really wanted to retreat from Gettysburg but was forced to stay by the vote of his subordinate commanders). McPherson also proves however, that some myths die hard. These include the well-known tale of the Henry Heth/shoe story (that the battle was fought over a supposed supply of shoes or shoe factory located in the town) and the equestrian statue/hoooves pattern (the number of the horse's hooves raised off the ground indicates the fate of the rider at Gettysburg). It is obvious from his treatment of these subjects that McPherson strongly dislikes the idea that these myths (which he apparently has repeated on his tours) are now being challenged by more recent research. Conversely, he attempts to debunk the famous Barlow-Gordon story of July 1 (long since considered a fictitious post-war creation of John Gordon) which modern scrutiny reveals may actually have occurred.

An area of more serious concern, however, is the number of errors. Nearly all of these are minor, though there are enough sprinkled throughout the book to give the reader serious pause. While some of these mistakes deal with the history

of the park and post-battle incidents, others relate directly to the battle. Most of these could have been easily avoided if the manuscript had received even a cursory historical proofreading (which it apparently did not).

Considering McPherson's deservedly high standing in the Civil War community, these latter errors and other problems are both puzzling and disappointing. He appears to have written this book in haste, which may explain some of these issues. As an introduction to the campaign, this book is adequate, allowing the reader to understand the chronologically and relationship of the major events. For those familiar with Gettysburg, however, this book would probably be a disappointment.

An abridged version of this book is also available as an audio book from Random House Audio. Consisting of a set of two CDs, it is two hours long and read by McPherson himself. This version is essentially the same as the book, with the obvious drawbacks of being abridged and not containing the maps that are used the book.

Eric Campbell has worked as a Park Ranger-Historian at Gettysburg National Military Park for over 15 years. His book, "A Grand Terrible Drama": From Gettysburg to Petersburg, The Civil War Letters of Charles Wellington Reed," was published by Fordham University Press in 2000. E-mail: eric_campbell@nps.gov