

At the Forefront of Lee's Invasion: Retribution, Plunder, and Clashing Cultures on Richard S. Ewell's Road to Gettysburg

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Review

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Wynstra, Robert J. *At the Forefront of Lee's Invasion: Retribution, Plunder, and Clashing Cultures on Richard S. Ewell's Road to Gettysburg*. Kent State University Press, \$49.95 ISBN 9781606353547

Campaign histories of the Civil War concentrate their efforts on the subsequent battles that offensives generate, but tend to overlook the movements that lead up to the battles themselves. Robert J. Wynstra's *At the Forefront of Lee's Invasion: Retribution, Plunder, and Clashing Cultures on Richard S. Ewell's Road to Gettysburg* takes a very different approach in that it is purely an account of one Confederate corps' movement to battle, with only a cursory description of the Battle of Gettysburg at the end. As the leading element of Robert E. Lee's incursion into Pennsylvania in 1863, Lt. Gen. Richard Ewell's II Corps conducted the deepest penetration into Union territory by Confederate infantry and therefore had the most contact with Union civilians during the operation. The interaction between Ewell's soldiers and Union civilians is the main point of the book, as Wynstra uses copious sources to describe not only Ewell's movements through the Maryland and Pennsylvania countryside but also their interaction with the civilians whose property was seized to supply Confederate needs. In a campaign that lasted more than a month, Ewell's command inflicted considerable damage on the local economy, whose abundance was a surprise to many of the Southern soldiers.

Wynstra vividly describes the campaign through a multitude of primary sources. From the opening clashes in western Virginia, where the II Corps defeated Union forces at the Second Battle of Winchester and captured a sizeable enemy garrison, to its ultimate advance near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania before culminating the campaign at Gettysburg, the author clearly and substantially depicts the entire march of Ewell's command. His civilian accounts show the full range of civilian reaction to the sudden arrival of enemy troops. Understandably, many civilians panicked and fled the Confederate advance, while others hid themselves and their goods to avoid contact with Confederate soldiers. Some residents, either in a bid to protect themselves or

harboring actual Southern sympathies, welcomed the invaders or provided information to Southern troops. Most, however, either could not avoid the Confederate advance or failed to hide themselves or their property, which usually wound up in the hands of Ewell's men. If contact with Confederate troops was unavoidable, Northern civilians tried persuasion, reason, or pleas of charity to avoid property loss, but to no avail. As indicated in his title, Ewell's troops were predisposed to retribution and plunder. The latter was a necessity to supply themselves deep in enemy territory (even though the loot included many items not needed for a military campaign), and the former was a conscious choice in response to widespread foraging and pillaging by Union troops in any number of occasions on Southern soil. The determination to obtain property while on Northern soil led, as Wynstra describes, to instances where communities were sacked, funds extorted to prevent destruction, and, in some cases, violence and murder. In describing such a range of actions and events, Wynstra provides an impressive number of sources that, along with a large number of maps and illustrations, allows the reader to chart Ewell's progress through the long and complex campaign.

While an excellent campaign history, *At the Forefront of Lee's Invasion* is not a complete success. The text is lacking in thematic analysis and instead relies on solely on narrative accounts, the brief Introduction is merely a summary of Ewell's early wartime career, and does nothing to establish a wider purpose for the manuscript. Wynstra, for instance, does not explain how the experience of Ewell's corps differed from the other two Confederate infantry corps or J.E.B. Stuart's cavalry. Nor does the conclusion's description of the Battle of Gettysburg place Ewell's pre-battle activities into context of how his march effected his questionable performance in the first days of July. There is also no relative analysis of Union and Confederate foraging policy, although the text clearly presents an opportunity to do so. A final issue is the book's title. Wynstra addresses the topic of retribution and plunder, but an account of cultural clashes is less clear. There is no discussion of how soldiers appropriating civilian property, a common feature of the Civil War, amounted to a cultural clash. The most obvious cultural clash was the widespread Confederate practice of sending all captured African Americans, free or otherwise, to the South and into slavery, an act which Wynstra dismisses with little consideration of its implications. The result is a book that provides a highly detailed account of an important wartime campaign, but does not provide a complete picture of why the campaign was important.

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