

Meade at Gettysburg: A Study in Command

Christopher S. Stowe

United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College, Quantico, Virginia,
christopher.stowe@usmcu.edu

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Review

Stowe, Christopher S.

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Brown, Kent Masterson. *Meade at Gettysburg: A Study in Command*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2021. HARDCOVER. \$35.00 ISBN 9781469661995 pp. 475

As Civil War enthusiasts are almost universally aware, George Gordon Meade, the Army of Potomac's commander at the battle of Gettysburg, possesses something of an unusual historiographical bequest. Placed in charge of the North's principal field force mere days before its great Pennsylvania victory, Meade's creditable work there has been routinely diminished by historians, the effects of which have reduced the Philadelphian to near-cipher status within no small portion of the battle's writings. To be sure, criticism of his military performance during the summer 1863 campaign began straightway after R. E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia withdrew across a rain-swollen Potomac River to gain the necessary space and time to campaign anew. Stung by accusations touching his leadership and decision-making by a caviling public press over Lee's "escape," Meade noted caustically in December that it might yet be revealed that he had not been present at Gettysburg in the first place, such had his star fallen in so short a time. Still, most serious students are cognizant too that published works rehabilitating Meade's Gettysburg standing, undertaken first by the general's son and namesake in 1883, had by the early years of the present century gained their own sure footing: books and essays by Civil War specialists Edwin B. Coddington, Harry W. Pfanz, Richard A. Sauer, A. Wilson Greene, and Stephen W. Sears countered effectively, so it seemed, the more damaging claims of his detractors.

Yet—and unsurprising given Gettysburg's hold upon Civil War readership—Meade's conduct during the Pennsylvania campaign continues to be contested historiographical terrain. Perhaps no better indication of this is Allen C. Guelzo's iconoclastic *Gettysburg: The Last Invasion*, a sesquicentennial volume that, in revisiting wartime and postbellum charges, roundly challenged the general's actions as well as his manly character, intimating that Meade's failure to close with and finish Lee was spurred by his repudiation of Republican President Abraham

Lincoln's emancipation strategy. In the years since, further rejective takes by Thomas J. Ryan and others have mixed with the favorable assessment of John G. Selby as well as thematic, contextual offerings of Jennifer M. Murray and this reviewer. Against a background, then, of a cumulative literature encompassing thousands of pamphlets, essays, and monographs, it is extraordinary that not a single full-length volume had ever been dedicated solely to "Old Four-Eye" and his army's fateful fortnight from the Potomac to Pennsylvania and back again. With the University of North Carolina Press's publication of Kent Masterson Brown's *Meade at Gettysburg: A Study in Command*, a noticeable void now has been filled.

Brown possesses the credentials required effectively to handle the task. His vitae includes *Cushing of Gettysburg: The Story of a Union Artillery Commander* and *Retreat from Gettysburg: Lee, Logistics, and the Pennsylvania Campaign*, the latter of which placed him among his generation's leading Gettysburg historians. A prodigious primary-source researcher and master prose stylist, Brown fashions here an outstanding campaign history, one that ranks highly in a genre filled with distinguished titles. His unequivocal representation of Meade on page five of his prologue—made possibly in *riposte* to Guelzo's more serious allegations—as "an effective operational commander and a relentless tactical commander who [was] fully aware of the strength and capability of his enemy" may surprise even the general's most faithful advocates; it will at the very least drive additional (and even spirited) discussion of the Potomac army's tetchy, traduced leader.

Brown's mastery of manuscript and published primary materials is immediately evident. His narrative recounts in astonishing granularity Meade's command decisions and those of his principal subordinates across the course of the campaign, focusing largely, if not entirely, on what modern military professionals call the "operational art"—that is, the employment of forces to achieve strategic objectives through the planning, sequencing, and execution of tactical actions. Brown scours, in addition to the multi-volume *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, sources from neglected record groups in the National Archives, the extensive personal papers of major Federal military actors, accounts from newspaper correspondents and other civilians touched by the battle, and contemporary maps ignored routinely even by the most proficient Civil War students. Especially welcome is the focus, well established in his earlier work, upon the intricacies of military logistics and supply, without which no operational study can be considered adequate. Indeed, Meade's bold decision to outrun

his forward-supply base at Westminster, Maryland, in response to what was wing commander John Fulton Reynolds's unilateral—and as Brown contends, unsanctioned—move to commit the army's First Corps at Gettysburg on July 1 represented the vital inflection point of the campaign. Similarly, the Philadelphian's appreciation of the army's significant post-battle sustainment challenges told heavily in his prudent, albeit purposeful, pursuit operation to the Potomac.

The author is, however, on somewhat less stable ground when attempting to place Meade's planning considerations and operational choices within the context of nineteenth-century military theory and practice. For example, Brown's Meade emerges within the book's pages as a commander who issues unambiguous instructions informed in large part by soldier-theorist Carl von Clausewitz. That this claim might create unease among military historians is unmistakable: while it is cheering to read theoretical constructions in any operational work, no linear relationship can be made among the Prussian master, whose writings remained little known through most of the century, his supposed American "disciple" Dennis Hart Mahan, and Mahan's pupil from West Point's Class of 1835, George G. Meade. A more robust engagement with secondary sources in both Civil War and western military history may have tempered these assessments. Then too, how effectively to convey intent to subordinates within a nineteenth-century milieu typified by mass armies conducting dispersed movements over large areas mandated alternate approaches to command. These approaches stressed decentralized control systems which obliged subordinates to exercise disciplined initiative within a leader's defined constraints. The commander's general instructions to Reynolds issued on the morning of the battle's first day are indicative of this trend. Yet Brown chooses instead to emphasize Meade's more peremptory and situationally specific June 30 missive to Reynolds, in addition to aspects of the celebrated July 1 Pipe Creek Circular, to underscore a form of direct leadership style that had by the 1860s already been challenged by the requirements of modern war.

Methodological critiques aside, *Meade at Gettysburg* is an important contribution to Civil War literature. It adds to its author's well-earned status as one of Gettysburg's scholarly doyens; more significantly, its effort to gain understanding of Meade the soldier and his command decisions, as well as its recognition of the general's significant impact upon the battle's outcome, will place it among the Pennsylvania campaign's prominent and preferred volumes.

Christopher S. Stowe serves as Professor of Military History at the United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College, Quantico, Virginia. The author of numerous essays and reviews in

Civil War and nineteenth-century military history, he is completing a full-length, critical biography of George Gordon Meade. He can be reached at christopher.stowe@usmcu.edu