Reviews

Is the Gettysburg battlefield a place for commemoration, relaxing with the family—or both?

The word “Gettysburg” evokes many images—the battle, the town, the film. In his seminal book Gettysburg: Memory, Market, and an American Shrine (Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 2003, $29.95) Jim Weeks explores the commercialization of the Gettysburg battlefield from the days immediately following that first week of July 1863 through the “Heritage Gettysburg” phase of the early 21st century.

He comments that “Not only has Gettysburg been commercially packaged since 1863 but the shrine owes its iconic status to the marketplace.” The intertwining of the battlefield and the tourism market has moved through several phases: from genteel patriotic uplift, monument contemplation, road excursions and automobile quick-stop touring to heritage tourism. Each generation remade Gettysburg National Battlefield Park into its own image of what the fighting ground should mean. It is this fluidity that defines Gettysburg as an “ongoing project with no final meaning, an American shrine in a continuous state of becoming.”

Within the context of how to market Gettysburg as the quintessential Civil War shrine—one that would appeal to all classes, races, ages and patriotic bents—the movers and shakers behind the park strove to bring visitors to town. The juxtaposition of hucksterism and reverence, while sometimes at odds in the minds of the memorialists, has served to keep Gettysburg alive and viable as a multifaceted tourist attraction for more than 140 years.

Weeks, who recently became editor of Civil War Times, writes about each phase in Gettysburg’s evolution, from the bloody carnage picked over by relic hunters to the restoration of the landscape back to the way it appeared the day before the war. He explores the relationship between the town and the battlefield, and discusses the national context surrounding Gettysburg.

While the book takes a scholarly approach to the marketing of Gettysburg, it is a work essential to understanding the changes the land and people have undergone while keeping the idea of Gettysburg as an icon firmly planted in the minds of most Americans. The 28 black-and-white photographs and drawings depict the battlefield throughout its history and visually enhance the textual descriptions. This is a welcome addition to the literature on Gettysburg and recommended reading for the serious student of the battle’s aftermath.

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If nothing else, the charge that Abraham Lincoln was corrupt is enough of a shock to the reader to ensure that Charles Higham’s Murthering Mr. Lincoln: A New Detection of the 19th Century’s Most Famous Crime (New Millennium Press, Beverly Hills, Calif., 2004, $24.95) entertains—and sometimes surprises—both assassination scholars and unwary newcomers to the topic alike.

The accepted facts of the assassination are that a gang of Confederate sympathizers, led by the megalomaniacal actor John Wilkes Booth, tried to decapitate the U.S. government: on April 14, 1865. The plan was to murder the president, vice president, secretary of state and General Ulysses S. Grant. Ring leader Booth believed the crime would miraculously resurrect the fallen South. The murder of Lincoln and the unsuccessful assault on Secretary of State William Seward succeeded only in inflaming the North and placing a revenge-minded president in the White House in time for Reconstruction.

In recent years, some scholars have theorized that the plot extended to the Confederate secret service, and perhaps even to Confederate President Jefferson Davis. Their participation in the conspiracy was retaliation (so the theory goes) for an unsuccessful raid on Richmond in March 1864, a body count of 500 Union soldiers, and indications Confederate intelligence agents worked with the North have remained unproven.

Enter Higham, who suggests a new plot: a curtailment of the ongoing war and one man’s efforts to pull the nation from the brink of destruction. In effect perhaps, he had lost hope. Even Batman, after all, could only simply fly.

Higham, who is known for his controversial histories of the Scottish Highlander clan and the University of Chicago, has written a detailed, compelling—even if unproven—argument that Mary Surratt, the mother of one of the assassins, was merely a tool of the Roman Catholic Church and an American Unionist. Lincoln’s assassination was a projection of southern anger, and was carried out, according to Higham, by a small party of Unionists.

Review

Among the new titles available currently are: Mountain Crossings: the Tennessee Valley in Civil War (University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, 2004, $34.95). In the final months of the war, the Union turned attention to the strategically vital Tennessee River Basin. Its capture would have served the dual purpose of providing Union forces with an alternate route to Union lines of communication in the east and, short of a direct invasion of the Confederacy, represented the Union’s last hold on southern territory.

The history of how the Unionists managed to subdue the Tennessee mountains has long been clouded by the clash between local civilan, military, and Indian populations. This well-written, chronologically based work provides a clear account of those events, and is one of the best works ever to come out of the Tennessee Valley area. It is a story of both cooperation and conflict, and is well worth the time of those interested in regional history and military history.

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