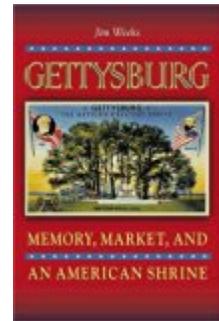


H-Net Reviews

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Jim Weeks. *Gettysburg: Memory, Market, and an American Shrine.* Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003. xii + 267 pp. \$32.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-10271-9.

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Gettysburg Profaned

For the last 153 years, the Battle of Gettysburg and the southern Pennsylvania town where it took place have been historically and culturally significant to large numbers of Americans. How and why this particular Civil War battle and battlefield achieved lasting prominence is a complicated subject that historians have puzzled over for many years. In his attempt to understand Gettysburg's place in American memory, Jim Weeks, the late editor of *Civil War Times Illustrated*, guides readers through the development of the battlefield as the nation's most popular Civil War tourist site and, as Weeks puts it, "an American shrine" (p. 6). The book, which is based on Weeks's Ph.D. dissertation, reveals the author's passion for his subject and his research into local sources. While he raises important questions about tourism at Gettysburg, Weeks has difficulty providing plausible answers.

Weeks begins by analyzing the development of tourism at Gettysburg as a competition between the sacred and the profane. Despite stating his wish to avoid setting up a false dichotomy between what he calls "sacred space" and "commercial culture" (p. 7), this is precisely what he does. For Weeks, every aspect of the battlefield's emergence as a tourist site exposes the struggle between the sacred, a term that Weeks never adequately defines, and the marketplace, a secular influence that Weeks condemns as tainted by self-interest and greed. His construction of a sacred/commercial dichotomy leads Weeks to pass negative judgments on every facet of Gettysburg's history as a tourist site and on everyone connected with the battlefield—from veterans and preservationists to tourists and commercial entrepreneurs—and

these judgments become, regrettably, the main point of the book. This is unfortunate because Weeks's narrow focus on the negative effects of the market obscures the history of tourism at the battlefield and overshadows the interesting material that Weeks uncovered in his close reading of Gettysburg's newspapers.

Based largely on evidence taken from local newspaper accounts, published tourist literature, and personal reminiscences (including his own), Weeks identifies four periods of tourist activity at Gettysburg and divides his book into four corresponding sections. Part 1 covers 1863-84, a period Weeks suggests was characterized by the "genteel" summer touring of middle-class whites who sought cultural and spiritual "uplift" through edifying visits to this historic site (pp. 42-48). In part 2, 1884-1920, Weeks highlights the heyday of commercial leisure when Gettysburg's railroads encouraged American patriots to make pilgrimages to the battlefield that reinforced concepts of heroism and national "valor" (pp. 57-58). Weeks argues in part 3, 1920-70, that for much of the twentieth century automobile touring and mass culture helped redefine Gettysburg as family vacations replaced the organized group tours and day trips that had been popular in previous years. Finally, in part 4, 1970-2000, Weeks examines the phenomenon of "heritage tourism," a public/private combination of supposedly authentic historic attractions, which he says represents the triumph of commercialism at Gettysburg (p. 174). Each section of Weeks's book includes two chapters, the first dealing with the manufacturing and marketing of Gettysburg during the period in question and the

second covering tourists and their experiences while visiting the battlefield. One drawback to this loose chronological arrangement of sections and chapters is that it leads to significant repetitions of material with Weeks reintroducing similar ideas, events, and examples for each new time period. Additionally, the book has a surprising number of typographical and spelling errors (at least a dozen), no bibliography, and an inadequate index.

Weeks's over-attention to economic analysis is particularly noticeable in his treatment of early developments at Gettysburg, where he offers almost no consideration of the political context in which initial commemorative and commercial activities took place. He contends that the market always trumped patriotic and political considerations, arguing that Gettysburg's political ramifications stemmed from market incentives instead of considering the possibility that market decisions paralleled existing political trends. For Weeks, the emergence of the theme of national reconciliation at the battlefield was a marketing ploy designed to attract southern tourists, not a development reflective of political reconciliation at the national level that was encouraged by federal legislation mandating inclusion of Confederate battle lines within the battlefield park. Weeks also fails to explore connections between the popularity of reconciliation themes at Gettysburg and the influence of the Lost Cause ideology promulgated by Confederate sympathizers.

In addition, Weeks's concentration on economic analysis limits readers' understanding of what Gettysburg's developers and visitors thought about the battle and about tourism at the battlefield. In lamenting the profaning of Gettysburg by the market, he argues that, while promoters billed the battlefield as sacred space, from the beginning the site was just another commodity (p. 8). By explaining Gettysburg's popular appeal in economic rather than political or historical terms, Weeks portrays the thousands of visitors who trekked to Gettysburg each year as "raw materials" being fed into the maw of the commercial tourist industry (p. 74), first by the railroads and later by the National Park Service. His Gettysburg visitors were not historical actors making considered decisions about how to spend their time and money, but gullible tourists who lacked authentic connections to the history of the place they visited, and who were routinely cheated by souvenir hawkers, duped by carnival hucksters, taken in by historical illusionists, and titillated by the macabre. Drawn to Gettysburg by illegitimate means, they were tricked into believing they had encountered American history. Gettysburg's powerless visitors, veterans and tourists alike, were, according to Weeks, con-

ditioned by their economic status and consequently were fascinated not with any personal associations with the battle, or any political allegiance to the Union or the Confederacy, or any intellectual curiosity about the nation's history, or any search for relaxation and diversion. This neo-Marxist deconstruction of Gettysburg tourism fails to adequately account for the enduring popularity of the battlefield for Americans of widely divergent backgrounds. Moreover, it encourages Weeks to denigrate Gettysburg's tourists.

Concentrating on what he sees as tourists' hidden motivations, Weeks provides little or no evidence as he fastens implausible and often unflattering motives on everyone who visited the battlefield. He claims, for example, that Union veterans attended monument dedications and regimental reunions because they unconsciously sought "release" (p. 104) and the chance to "temporarily wield an authoritarian role" by donning Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) uniforms (p. 100). Similarly, Weeks asserts that genteel nineteenth-century visitors who ostensibly sought "moral improvement" through a trip to Gettysburg merely "used the rituals of patriotic touring as an excuse for carefree merrymaking" (p. 37). Weeks uncovers the veiled agendas of less-pretentious vacationers as well, finding that late-nineteenth-century railroad tours appealed to the "plebeian tastes" of "less-cultivated citizens" (p. 58), who unwittingly "used Gettysburg to mask play through pilgrimage" (p. 91).

According to Weeks, the choice of Gettysburg as a destination is almost incidental to this tourist play, even for African American visitors from Baltimore. Weeks portrays their turn-of-the-twentieth-century Emancipation Day excursions to Gettysburg's commercial attractions as rowdy escapes from the "authoritarian pressure" of Baltimore's elite black leaders who urged "self-denial, restraint, and self-discipline" on the city's working-class blacks (p. 97). In this analysis, he essentially denies black tourists any connection to the political or cultural meaning of Gettysburg. Similarly, Weeks contends that early twentieth-century auto tourists understood or cared little for the historical significance of the battlefield. In Weeks's interpretation, they used Gettysburg to escape the pressures of modernity by undertaking "self-managed journey[s] that provided release from routine" and enabled them to "control machines for a change instead of being controlled by machines" (p. 148).

Weeks asserts that later in the century Gettysburg continued to serve as an antidote to the pressures of modern life, that by the 1950s and 1960s "atomized subur-

ban families” (p. 158) touring the battlefield in station wagons found “entertainment masked as didacticism” (p. 161) that allowed for “bonding” between the generations and “provided escape from Cold War anxiety to a past untroubled by civil rights, nuclear war, or communist subversiveness and aggression” (p. 165). Weeks wistfully describes how mid-century Gettysburg visits connected white suburban Americans to a generic “national memory” (p. 158) that apparently had as much to do with frontier myths as the Civil War. The evidence for his Cold War interpretation of Gettysburg tourism is often taken from Weeks’s own memories of family visits to the battlefield, and he bathes those memories in a palpable nostalgia for boyhood innocence that mixes personal experience uneasily with historical analysis.

Weeks’s nostalgia colors his criticism of “Heritage Gettysburg,” a late-twentieth-century triumph of commercialism comprising an amalgamation of public and private attractions that allowed the profane to completely absorb the sacred and destroy the Gettysburg that he fondly recalls (p. 174). Ironically for Weeks, “heritage” commercialism sells “sacred memory” in the form of a supposed historical authenticity that he believes is too tainted by market forces to come close to historical truth (p. 173). He further complains that the town of Gettysburg itself is no longer genuine (i.e., no longer as he remembers it), because heritage tourism has “sucked the life out of the real town characterized by pharmacies, haberdasheries, neighborhood bars, and groceries, and replaced them with restored and fake storefronts housing antique shops, ‘authentic’ restaurants, collector’s boutiques, period clothing shops, and other enterprises catering to Civil War image tribes” (p. 182).

But Weeks is inconsistent on the question of historical authenticity when he turns to the latest developments at the National Park and questions the wisdom of the ongoing Park Service project to “restore” the battlefield to its 1863 appearance. Weeks sensibly asks, “If

all agree that certain ground is hallowed, does it need to have its historical integrity restored? Moreover, is there not a difference between preserving land to remember an event and transforming the land to look like it did when the event occurred” (p. 193)? Weeks goes on to offer trenchant commentary about the impossibility of achieving visual purity at a memorial park that is covered with hundreds of monuments and markers and thousands of tourists and their vehicles daily. Given his doubts about pursuing historic restoration on the battlefield, it is difficult to understand why Weeks is so troubled by what he sees as the inauthentic history on display in town.

His complaints about the town’s “hyperreal” heritage attractions notwithstanding (p. 186), one suspects that Weeks’s true unhappiness is less with the town than with the re-enactors who comprise many of Gettysburg’s twenty-first-century tourists. Weeks concludes his book by mocking present-day heritage tourists and Gettysburg enthusiasts, claiming that Civil War re-enactors look for “real” life in the past because they are dissatisfied with their lives in the present (p. 214), and that “those with mundane jobs or fragmented lives can find a sense of mastery and integrity through collecting Civil War memorabilia” (p. 211). The epilogue to his book hints at what a more judicious analysis of the motivations of Gettysburg tourists, past and present, might have entailed. On the next to last page, Weeks makes an important point about racial differences in Americans’ interpretations of Gettysburg, observing that “as the play of visiting blacks once affronted whites, the authenticity considered acceptable play today by whites seems inappropriate to minorities. After all, reenacting [the battle] not only puts play above politics, but also intentionally reinvokes a reality devoid of racial progress that was, ironically, precipitated by the Civil War” (p. 224). This reviewer wishes that the author had focused his entire book on this sort of analysis rather than on the false dichotomy he perceived between the sacred and the profane at Gettysburg.

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