H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Thomas A. Desjardin. *These Honored Dead: How the Story of Gettysburg Shaped American Memory.* Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2003. xxii + 246 pp. $26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-306-81267-5; $16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-306-81382-5.

Reviewed by Jeffrey Kosiorek (Department of History, University of Southern California)

Published on H-CivWar (November, 2006)

How Americans Constructed the Story of Gettysburg

In recent years historians have written extensively on memory, but few of these works concretely define or historicize memory, delineate the differences between personal and collective memory, or interrogate the psychological and social practices of remembering. Unfortunately, like these other studies, Thomas A. Desjardin's *These Honored Dead: How the Story of Gettysburg Shaped American Memory* suffers from similar deficiencies. In fact, despite the title of his work, Desjardin only engages memory occasionally throughout his work. Consequently, few historians working in memory studies will find anything innovative in *These Honored Dead*. But others–particularly military historians, Civil War buffs, and anyone with a passing interest in Gettysburg mythology–will find the book enlightening.

Few people are as capable of writing on Americans' relationship with Gettysburg as Desjardin. As he tells the reader in the introduction, while working on his dissertation, a history of "the 20th Maine and the Gettysburg campaign," he spent time at Gettysburg and began giving battlefield tours. After graduating, Desjardin continued to work at the battlefield and became fascinated not just with the battle itself, but how and why Gettysburg is so compelling to other Americans. Like the best battlefield interpreters, Desjardin, throughout his book, exhibits an exhaustive knowledge of the battle. Beyond just telling the story of the Battle of Gettysburg, he explains how the story itself was created. Desjardin uncovers the ways veterans, politicians, historians, publishers, moviemakers, and others constructed the narrative of Gettysburg most of us now accept as fact. As Desjardin articulates it, his chapters "lay out some of the social, political, and cultural themes that have helped shape Gettysburg mythology, and they attempt to expose some of the myths–from the great whoppers to the minor mistakes–that have made it such an important national symbol" (p. xxii).

These Honored Dead begins by explaining how the first accounts of the battle, even those by veterans attempting to honestly represent the fighting, failed to accurately depict what had occurred. Desjardin explains the fog of war caused many of the errors in the earliest reports from the field. Because of the chaos and stress of battle, participants found it difficult to process the action going on around them. Therefore, they often had hazy memories of the fighting. Moreover, since each participant only experienced a small slice of the combat and even general officers received incomplete and contradictory reports, nobody had an accurate and complete conception of what transpired across the large battlefield. Consequently, the initial reports included inaccuracies and omissions resulting from the battlefield commotion and confusion. Desjardin shows how, in the first years after the war, veterans compounded these early mistakes by basing some of their recollections on the imprecise reports of others. Veterans further colored their narratives of the battle by, sometimes unconsciously, aggrandizing and glorifying their units' role in order to memorialize fallen comrades, honor favorite commanders, or simply make their story more compelling.

Throughout the book, Desjardin highlights the transmission of battle stories, uncovering the layers of errors, exaggeration, and mythologizing behind some of the more compelling Gettysburg legends. For instance, in a chapter on Joshua Chamberlain, the heroic commander of the 20th Maine at Little Round Top immortalized in Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels* (1974), Desjardin demonstrates how the ostensible authority of eye-

witness accounts, corroborating statements, and after-action reports contributed to the construction of this "consummate Gettysburg hero." In examining "the 'story of the story' of Chamberlain at Gettysburg," Desjardin provides a telling case study in the ways late nineteenth-century society created its history of the Civil War. None of the writers–Confederate Colonel William C. Oates, 20th Maine Private Theodore Gerrish, and Chamberlain himself–whose work established the legend ever intended to misrepresent the battle. But, as participants who sought to relate their version of events years later, they used others' accounts to buttress their own hazy or incomplete recollections. This process resulted in a blending of fact and fiction that continued to inform later retellings of the past. Though Desjardin shows elsewhere in the book–particularly in the case of General Dan Sickles–that fictionalized memories of the past can be deliberately constructed, the case of Chamberlain suggests not all incorrect memories are intentionally crafted.

One person who did take an active role in shaping Americans' understanding of Gettysburg, Desjardin makes clear, was John Bachelder. A painter, Bachelder arrived at the field shortly after the fighting ended, hoping to gather information for a major work on the battle. He started to query Union participants and drew an isometric map of the battlefield based on his own observations and interviews. Shifting from painter to historian, Bachelder continued to interview veterans of the battle during and after the Civil War. As Desjardin establishes, "Many found [Bachelder's] original isometric drawing of the field so visually intriguing that it somehow lent credibility to his skills as a historian" (p. 89). In 1880, with Bachelder's authority established through his map and copious interviews of Gettysburg veterans, Congress granted him $50,000 to write a history of the battle. To many in the public, he now became the official Gettysburg historian, though Congress never designated him as such. Based on his research and sense of the dramatic, Bachelder invented the term "High Water Mark of the Rebellion" for the furthest advance of the Confederate forces at the "Copse of Trees" (also a Bachelder invention) during Pickett's Charge on the last day of the battle. Desjardin argues Bachelder's turns of phrase helped establish Gettysburg as the most important moment in the entire Civil War. The irony, Desjardin points out, is that just as Bachelder himself helped solidify a single unifying way of understanding Gettysburg's place in the Civil War and American history, he also personally recognized the impossibility of making a single history out of the countless contradictory accounts of the battle. Probably because of that, Bachelder never finished his history for Congress.

What Desjardin does well in *These Honored Dead* is provide a revealing and interesting look at how Americans constructed their history of the Battle of Gettysburg. In doing so, he shows that much of what we think we know about the battle is not factually accurate. Moreover, he suggests that the confusion of war and the vagaries of human memory make it nearly impossible to know with any degree of certainty what actually occurred on the battlefield. Military historians would certainly benefit from reading this work and learning from these insights; they will take away a better understanding of Gettysburg and, hopefully, apply Desjardin's rigorous research methods to other wars and battles. Where *These Honored Dead* will undoubtedly find the most significant readership is amongst the legions of Civil War buffs. Perhaps recognizing the public's misconceptions about Gettysburg will challenge some of these readers to interrogate their own fascination with the Civil War. From there, they might think about how they use the past to make sense out of the present and inform their own personal identity and conception of the nation.

Unfortunately, as a social and cultural historian, I found *These Honored Dead* too narrowly focused and, at times, wearisome in its arcane detail. Throughout the book, the same facts and anecdotes recur. For example, Desjardin reminds his audience repeatedly that some of the nation's most closely held "memories" of the battle are wrong: the Confederates were not marching on Gettysburg to pillage a shoe factory (pp. 57-59, 121, 189) and there were not 50,000 dead at Gettysburg, as Ted Turner stated before a broadcast of the movie *Gettysburg*, nearly the same as in the entire Vietnam War (pp. 58, 149, 180-181, 202-203). While the repetition is bothersome, more frustrating is that most of Desjardin's work is parochial, focused almost solely on Gettysburg for its own sake. Even when Desjardin does try to link Gettysburg with larger issues of Civil War remembrance, he ends up making grand, tantalizing statements about "American memory" without further elaborating on them or providing evidence of their applicability. For instance, in the introduction Desjardin claims the story of Gettysburg as people understand it in America is "a mythological construct that reveals much about Americans and their individual and collective identities" (p. 7). In the chapters that follow, Desjardin commendably details how many of the battle's legends were formed and fabricated over time. But he "reveals" far less about how Americans shape their personal, collective, and national identities

from these myths.

Where Desjardin most neglects to connect his analysis of Gettysburg with larger historical issues is in the "Lost in the Lost Cause" chapter. Here Desjardin contends that immediately after their defeat at Gettysburg–the first clear-cut setback for the Southern cause–Confederates blamed their own personal and sectional moral failings for causing what they saw as divine recompense. As the war continued and especially during Reconstruction, Southerners rejected the idea that their loss resulted from fighting against the will of God. In place of their initial perception, they invented the Lost Cause, placing blame on other agents–especially J. E. B Stuart, Richard S. Ewell, and James Longstreet–rather than divine judgment, Southern character, or Lee's leadership. Desjardin concludes "the mythology as a whole was inextricably linked with the story of Gettysburg" (p. 125). By reducing the Lost Cause to issues of battlefield tactics, supply and armaments, and soldiers' bravery and fortitude, such a claim misses the social, cultural, and political import of the Lost Cause. There is little doubt that the refighting of the war–including the battle of Gettysburg–in the pages of veterans' journals played a key role in the development of the Lost Cause. But, as historians have shown, the cause that was lost on the field was not mere military victory, but white supremacy, agrarianism, and the hegemony of the planters.[1]

These Honored Dead also disappointed me by not fulfilling the promise of its title. Rather than looking at how "Gettysburg shaped American Memory," the book focuses on the ways Americans recorded, understood, and commemorated the battle. The absence of any significant discussion of how the battle shaped national memory gets back to my initial criticism of the work that Desjardin fails to engage other theoretical work on memory, does not historicize the practice of remembering, and neglects to provide any definition of what he means by memory. Desjardin's discussion of the effects the fog of war had on individuals' memory of the battle is one of the few times he even acknowledges that remembering is a physiological act. But the failure to develop a working model of memory does not lie solely with Desjardin. Rather than simply wielding memory as a catch-all for how society deals with its past, all historians need to engage the rich insights from memory studies in other disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, literary criticism, psychology, philosophy, and, even, in neuroscience. Only then will we begin to truly understand how individuals and communities use memory of the past to shape their views of the world around them.

Note

[1]. See Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South, 1865 to 1913* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Rollin G. Osterweis, *The Myth of the Lost Cause, 1865-1900* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1973); Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980); David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); and Fred Arthur Bailey, "Free Speech and the Lost Cause in the Old Dominion," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 103 (1995): 237-266.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar

Citation: Jeffrey Kosiorek. Review of Desjardin, Thomas A., *These Honored Dead: How the Story of Gettysburg Shaped American Memory.* H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. November, 2006.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12511

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.