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Carol Reardon. *Pickett's Charge in History and Memory.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. x + 285 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2379-8.

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"Pickett's Charge" has always been something of a misnomer, a name firmly attached to an assault that in reality was not led by Gen. George E. Pickett nor made up primarily of Virginians. But, argues Carol Reardon, such has been the "chameleonlike aspect" (p. 3) of Pickett's Charge that its longstanding hold on the American imagination has "demanded little adherence to historical fact" (p. 4). For a country seeking reconciliation, Reardon explains, Pickett's Charge quickly came to exemplify the "timeless values of gallantry, heroism, and noble sacrifice" (p. 4), values Americans associated most strongly with Virginia troops. However much North Carolinians ridiculed "Pickett's newspaper charge" and griped that "Pettigrew lost more men" than Pickett's Division; when it came to popular memory, Reardon concludes, "Pickett and his men decisively won" (p. 198).

Following a short prologue, Reardon lays out the details of her story in eight brief chapters. In her first chapter, Reardon advances the debatable argument that the modern historian can never know what happened at Gettysburg in 1863 because "the disconnected threads representing thousands of individual perceptions of Pickett's Charge" (p. 20) are too numerous and confusing to allow a clear picture of the fighting to emerge. Where history cannot be pinned down, however, memory is somewhat easier to discern: after Gettysburg, the Union survivors savored their victory and the Confederates looked for an explanation for their defeat.

Reardon's second and third chapters describe newspaper and historical accounts of Pickett's Charge. While the northern press understandably heralded Union success, the southern press (concentrated mainly in Richmond) gave Pickett's name to the climactic July 3 assault and provided a strong "foundation of facts and fancy for legend building and myth making" (p. 49). Historians and other writers used these often inaccurate newspaper reports as the basis for their postwar battle narratives. By the 1870s, Reardon explains, two points about Gettysburg were commonly accepted whatever their grounding in fact: that it was the turning point of the war and that Pickett's men were its most courageous heroes.

National reconciliation is the underlying subject of chapters four and five. In "Binding the Wounds of War," Reardon recounts the story of a small 1887 battlefield reunion between survivors of Pickett's Division and members of the Philadelphia Brigade. Noting that the former enemies praised each other's courage and shook hands at the Angle, Reardon exaggerates the ingenuousness of these gestures when she concludes that "Virginian and Pennsylvanian parted close friends" (p. 103). Reardon acknowledges in chapter five, "Monuments to Memory," that not all northern veterans were as willing as the Philadelphians to extend a hand of friendship to the South. Still, she persuasively argues, in commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the charge in 1888, many Union regiments paid so much attention to the defeat of Pickett and his men that the northerners essentially accepted the heroism of the Confederates as an undisputed fact. Preoccupied during the 1880s with how posterity would recall their own actions, Reardon writes, northern veterans "rediscovered a serious interest in the tactical details of the Union defense" (p. 109).

Confederates, too, were interested in the details of the fighting, battling within their ranks about which regiments had earned glory on the field. In chapters six and seven, Reardon examines the impassioned efforts of North Carolinians to set the historical record straight about their valiant participation in Pickett's Charge. The Tar Heels faced an impossible task, however, since southerners by the late nineteenth century regarded Pickett's Virginians as representative of "all truly faithful Confederate soldiers" and northerners had even begun "to embrace Virginia's heroes as their own" (p. 154). In the end, Reardon concludes, Virginia stood victorious.

Reardon's final chapter covers the Blue-Gray Reunion held at Gettysburg in 1913. Contending that by this date memory had thoroughly won out over historical accuracy, Reardon laments the fact that in popular opin-

ion Virginia alone received credit for the glorious defeat that was Pickett's Charge. As for public perceptions of the larger conflict, Reardon readily accepts the proposition that sectional strife had been completely buried by 1913, concurring with the observation of one attendee that "the celebration 'forged the last link in the reunion of the North and the South, and wiped out the last remnant of bitterness and hostile feeling"' (p. 197).

In her epilogue, Reardon ruefully observes that at Gettysburg today "the memory of Pickett's Charge is up for sale" (p. 210). A tour of latter-day souvenir stands unsurprisingly verifies Reardon's general thesis: images of Virginians are available everywhere, but few North Carolinians are to be found. The T-shirt wars confirm that Pickett won out over Pettigrew.

The question of Pickett versus Pettigrew is an old one, asked most pointedly in a polemic published by North Carolinian William R. Bond in 1888. His *Pickett or Pettigrew? An Historical Essay* is one of hundreds of primary sources Carol Reardon consulted for her study of Pickett's Charge. Indeed, she has looked at so many newspaper accounts, battle narratives, and unit histories that future historians will be in her debt for gathering together in one volume so much information about how Americans viewed Pickett's Charge between 1863 and 1913.

Despite Reardon's determined effort to track down and cite obscure primary sources, however, she gives short shrift to relevant secondary sources, particularly those dealing with the popular legacy of Gettysburg and the Civil War. Reardon does not refer, for example, to the fine essays written by John S. Patterson [1] and Edward Tabor Linenthal [2] on the history and significance of the Gettysburg battlefield. Nor does she take advantage of recent literature on national reconciliation that has focused on issues of gender and race.

In addition, Reardon tends to be insufficiently critical of the sources she does use. Perhaps this reticence stems from her belief that historians can never know what happened in the past because individual recollections of it are not reliable. "Even the best scholar," she writes, "could not tell the whole story. The selectivity of the soldiers' memories had made this impossible" (p. 2). Reardon has chosen not to sift through the conflicting testimony about Pickett's Charge to come up with a plausible scenario for the events of July 3, 1863, based on a preponderance of the historical evidence. This decision sets up an odd dynamic in the book: Reardon's recurring discussions of the historical disputes among battle veterans and other observers are enervated by her reluctance to share her own conclusions about the battle with the reader. Reardon does not consider the likelihood that the historian actually knows more about the contours of the battle than the participants, albeit from a different perspective. Given the wide interpretive lens a historian has at his or her disposal, surely differentiating between credible first-hand reporting and mere bravado, between sincerity and bombast, is not impossible.

Often, though, Reardon is content to accept her evidence at face value and dig no further. In her discussion of the 1887 Gettysburg reunion between Pickett's Division and the Philadelphia Brigade, for example, Reardon is quick to hear heartfelt reconciliation in the words of the veterans who met on the historic field. She interprets this poignant reversal of opinion to the passing of time that allowed veterans to overcome the "emotional pain" of the battle experience (p. 94). Unselfish magnanimity, however, was probably not the Philadelphians' only motivation for inviting the Virginians to Gettysburg. As battle participants, the survivors of Pickett's Division were in a position to bolster or refute the claims to glory put forth by the 69th and 71st Pennsylvania infantry regiments. These two regiments were involved in an acrimonious quarrel with the 72nd Pennsylvania infantry (known as the Philadelphia Fire Zouaves), a disagreement over honor that included accusations about whose forces had really held the Angle and which men had broken under fire. Their reputations at stake, proper placement of the regimental monuments became all important, so much so that the issue was ultimately decided (in favor of the 72nd Pennsylvania) by Pennsylvania's highest court.

While this jockeying for position among Union regiments may look like a minor sideshow, in truth it went to the core of what northern veterans were trying to accomplish at Gettysburg during the 1880s and 1890s. They were constructing a shrine to their own patriotism, writing the history of their heroism (and that of their fallen comrades) on the landscape with their monuments. In this instance, the 71st Pennsylvania Volunteers claimed to have held "the key" to the entire Union position, and with it "the fate of the war."[3] What better confirmation of this glorious distinction than the presence at their monument dedication of a remnant of the vanquished foe?

By the battle's fiftieth anniversary, romance and nostalgia about the war had overwhelmed most other sentiments, though not in as straightforward a manner as Reardon would have it. In newspapers and other reports, the celebration played out as a feast of national forgiveness exemplified by touching reunion scenes. For these

vignettes, Reardon relies heavily on an anecdotal account of the Blue-Gray Reunion written by New Jersey veteran Walter H. Blake. Blake enthusiastically recorded every stirring story he could find of personal absolution supposedly witnessed at the reunion: in the tent camp, a Virginian runs across the Minnesotans who had captured his regiment's battle flag and finds that they are regular guys. At the Angle, one of Pickett's men meets and clasps hands with a New Yorker who had beaten him over the head with a rifle butt during the charge. A Virginian who had been wounded in the assault visits the stone wall on Cemetery Ridge, where he finds and embraces the very Pennsylvanian who in 1863 had given him water and taken him to a dressing station.

Reardon repeats these apocryphal tales as though they were genuine and comments without apparent irony that the assembled veterans had "carried forward the theme of national reunion spontaneously" (pp. 190-91). Reardon does not seem to appreciate the scripted, ritualized, and highly orchestrated nature of the 1913 Gettysburg Reunion, a historical pageant of sorts that was planned in detail by the Pennsylvania (Reunion) Commission and watched closely by the entire nation. While a great many of the veterans in attendance were no doubt sincere in expressing mutual friendship and forgiveness, the reunion itself was hardly the benign commemoration Reardon describes. The 1913 celebration was based on an unspoken understanding about the superiority and racial unity of all white Americans. Seen in this context, the indisputable fact that Pickett was remembered over Pettigrew represented just one aspect of a developing national agreement about how the Civil War would be interpreted.

That Reardon neglects the larger ramifications of the 1913 reunion is symptomatic of the book's most serious shortcoming. Her premise throughout is that history and memory are distinct realms, that history is basically "true" while memory is made up of "the imperfectly remembered disconnected strands of battle experience" (p. 109). This false dichotomy between history and memory is not particularly useful in understanding how Pickett became the hero of Gettysburg, for history and memory are not separate spheres at all, but are inextricably intertwined. Memory did not win out over history in the case of Pickett's Charge so much as what was called history grew out of a collective consciousness informed by memory.

For Reardon, the "history" of Pickett's Charge "has competed with, been obscured by, even attacked by, memory" (p. 10). Regarding history and memory as antithetical, however, does little to reveal the process by which historical tradition is created. The power of tradition to distort objective historical reality is undeniable. David Thelen has argued, nevertheless, that in studying historical memory "the important question is not how accurately a recollection fitted some piece of a past reality, but why historical actors constructed their memories in a particular way at a particular time."[4] To answer this question, we need to learn more than Reardon has told us about the broader social, cultural, and political contexts in which Americans made Pickett's Charge a defining experience in their nation's history.

[1]. *Prospects*, 7 (1982)

[2]. *Sacred Ground: Americans and Their Battlefields* (1991)

[3]. John P. Nicholson, ed., *Pennsylvania Gettysburg* (1904), p. 411.

[4]. *Journal of American History*, 75 (March 1989), p. 1125

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