

J. William Thompson. *From Memory to Memorial: Shanksville, America, and Flight 93*. Keystone Books Series. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017. 200 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-271-07699-7.

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Within the considerable body of scholarship about memory and the events of September 11, 2001, few works have paid serious attention to the memorial process that has taken place in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. The story of the heroic passenger revolt that presumably took place aboard United Flight 93 was widely embraced, serving in popular narratives as the “origin” of the US military actions that followed the attacks. Yet few researchers (or non-local journalists) have gone to western Pennsylvania to gain an in-depth understanding of the memorial process that played out for more than a decade on the land where the airplane crashed. So far, the main exception has been sociologist Alexander T. Riley’s 2015 book *Angel Patriots: The Crash of United Flight 93 and the Myth of America*, which offers an intellectually sophisticated and comprehensive treatment of the various ways the Flight 93 story has been told, and which interprets those cultural texts and practices as forms of civil religion and national mythmaking.

Now there is another book-length treatment of this subject, J. William Thompson’s *From Memory to Memorial: Shanksville, America, and Flight 93*, and its style and content are complementary to Riley’s work. While it covers much of the same ground, it offers more of a chronological story

and more of a populist point of view. The author draws on some academic theory about memorialization, and as the former editor of *Landscape Architecture* magazine, he brings his own expertise to the task of explaining the memorial design process. Most significantly, he has made extensive use of the archives of the National Park Service’s Flight 93 National Memorial Oral History Project. For all of these reasons, this book may well be used in university classrooms. Yet its primary audience is more likely to be a popular one, and indeed Penn State University Press has issued it as part of its Keystone Books series (“accessible” works “intended to serve the citizens of Pennsylvania”).

This book’s central questions are important ones: How was it that the Flight 93 National Memorial ended up being as it is? What other stories might have been told, or forms of tribute might have been made, on the crash site? Thompson describes a range of alternative visions, some of which did take shape elsewhere in the area or in media, and he traces the initial (and to some extent continuing) disagreement about who counted as a “hero.” He also discusses the international competition through which the eventual memorial design was chosen from more than a thousand

entries, and his professional background enriches his explanations of the five finalist designs. He further offers an eye-opening account of the long battle between the owners of the crash-site land and the federal government as the latter attempted to purchase the land to make a memorial—a standoff that delayed construction for years.

The book's main strength is Thompson's ability to weave together multiple types of source material into a highly readable narrative about the large cast of characters who were affected by this disaster. Those people include relatives of victims, first responders to the crash, and a variety of contributors to the debate about the nature of the permanent memorial. Their words come from the oral history project interviews, Thompson's own interviews with them, and press coverage. Those people disagree with each other, expressing a complex mix of often-strong views. Thompson does a good job of conveying their feelings in a balanced way.

Because of the author's writing style, this book is an easy read, despite how much information is in it. There are moments when accessibility slips into folksiness: the disaster "cracked open this sleepy hollow," a "sweet village" that no longer was protected from "the hurly-burly of the outside world" but still offered reassurance that "helping your neighbor is still practiced in these Pennsylvania hills" (pp. 71, 24, 147). Mostly, however, the colloquial prose disguises the great deal of work the author has done, the skill with which he has made it seem that we are simply hearing directly from the story's characters themselves

As a landscape-architecture writer, Thompson is mainly concerned with the process that led to the creation of the permanent memorial, and he did not begin researching this book until that memorial's 2011 opening. Thus, even though this story is presented chronologically, Thompson researched it retrospectively rather than observing it unfold. One consequence is that little attention is given to

the site's previous "temporary" memorial, which Thompson saw only once and which was gone by the time he started working on the book. Like most journalists and most scholars, he briefly characterizes that earlier memorial as an amateurish, "massive array of symbols of patriotism and religious faith [on a] chain-link fence" (p. 138). As someone who visited that temporary memorial many times (and who is neither religious nor conservative), I found it to be an extraordinary, evolving piece of folk art, a constantly replenished tribute that seemed powerfully alive in a place of death. During the nine years it stood on that windy hill, millions of people visited and left objects there. It is an important part of the story of the journey "from memory to memorial" on this particular landscape, and it is largely missing from this book's account of that journey.

Nevertheless, the book tells a big story effectively, giving readers a sense of the ten-year passage of time and ideas that led to the site that they might visit today. More broadly, Thompson raises and thoughtfully examines some of the central questions about public memory—and he does so with an example that has been relatively neglected, even seventeen years after the disaster. Therefore, this book makes an engaging and fresh contribution to ongoing discussions of memorialization, in general as well as with specific regard to the events of September 11th.

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