

**John G. Selby.** *Meade: The Price of Command, 1863–1865*. Civil War Soldiers and Strategies Series: Kent State University Press, 2018. Maps. 432 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-60635-348-6.

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On the afternoon of July 3, 1863, as three shattered Confederate divisions staggered back to Seminary Ridge, George Gordon Meade's reputation reached its zenith. Since then, his alleged ineffectiveness as Ulysses S. Grant's reluctant underling has characterized the Army of the Potomac's resilient commander for nearly 150 years. In *Meade: The Price of Command, 1863-1865*, John G. Selby sets out to restore Meade's moribund status by arguing that the hero of Gettysburg belongs among the war's top generals. Using a variety of sources, Selby attempts to mitigate some of the blunders, personality clashes, political skullduggery, and historiographic trends that formulated Meade's ambiguous image.

After devoting a scant fourteen pages to Meade's life prior to commanding the Army of the Potomac, the rest of the first chapter traces his efforts to intercept and engage Robert E. Lee's army as it ran amok in Pennsylvania. One of Meade's contingency plans, the "Pipe Creek Circular," led his critics to claim he was reluctant to attack the invading army. This portends several themes: the varying qualities and loyalties of the army's corps commanders, a running debate between offensive or defensive tactics, the scheming of enemies in and out of the Army of the Potomac, and constant government meddling.

At Gettysburg, the army's successful concentration on July 1 was offset by its rough handling at the hands of the Confederates. On the second day, Meade's inability to control Third Corps commander Daniel Sickles was countered by the army's masterful defense against Lee's attacks on its flanks. During the council of war on the night of July 2, polling his corps commanders and accurately predicting Lee's actions demonstrated Meade's clear assessment of the situation. The negatives—according to Dan Butterfield, Sickles, and other critics—were his inability to make decisions alone and alleged willingness to quit the field after two days of fighting. The repulse of George Pickett's attack vindicated the army's defensive posture, but Meade drew criticism for not counterattacking.

After pressure from the administration and public, Meade's failure to prevent Lee from escaping across a rain-swollen river generated a flood of condemnation, despite his insistence that his corps commanders, imposing enemy entrenchments, and poor logistics were responsible. During the Mine Run Campaign, the Army of the Potomac failed to bring Lee's army to battle, largely due to the ubiquitous defensive works that discouraged frontal assaults. The author argues that Meade frequently bore the blame for unsuccessful offensive operations because recalcitrant sub-

ordinates disobeyed his orders to attack. Meade's leadership of the Army of the Potomac was further compromised after Grant became overall Union commander in 1864. Besieged by critics in the press, passed over for promotion, and under scrutiny by the Committee on the Conduct of the War, Meade was aware of his marginalized status. Selby avoids Grant-bashing, suggesting instead that "Grant kept Meade on as a commander because he was useful *and* effective," and concludes that their teamwork was "one of the most important stories of the war" (p. 114).

Although solidly presented, Selby's evidence is not convincing enough to elevate the general's dossier. Blaming subordinates for his inability to defeat Lee at the Battle of the Wilderness, for the failure to capture Petersburg, and for the debacle at The Crater does not lessen Meade's culpability, despite the author's positive spin. Meade's diligence, honesty, and concern for his reputation elicit admiration but do not balance his well-documented shortcomings. His absence at Appomattox is a reminder of his odd place in the historical record. Selby misses a chance to compare Meade with the Union's other underappreciated general, George H. Thomas. Both were overshadowed by Grant's accomplishments and both died soon after the war, leaving them unable to respond to the published assaults on their reputations. More insightful comparisons between western and eastern armies might explain why Meade's talents seemed inferior to those of Grant's protégés Philip Sheridan and William T. Sherman; we also do not see much support from the Confederates who opposed him through much of the war.

The book needs a conclusion explaining Meade's place within the context of Civil War memory. While quoting from numerous published reminiscences, Selby does not analyze how the Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan memoirs contributed to Meade's negative postwar image, how the Lost Cause writers formulated much of the Grant versus Lee paradigm, or how the construc-

tion and dedication of his statue at the Gettysburg National Military Park influenced public perception of the victorious general. Since many memories were constructed in the decades after the war, we are left to wonder how Meade's image got so far off track. Though tightly constructed overall, the book's maps are only marginally helpful, and the text suffers from an overabundance of parenthetical asides. While Selby has offered a credible recounting of Meade's generalship, he has not provided the last word on the commander's place in the war's memory.

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