

Gary Gallagher, ed.. *Chancellorsville: The Battle and Its Aftermath*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. xvi + 263 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2275-3.



Reviewed by Lesley J. Gordon

Published on H-CivWar (July, 1996)

The Confederate victory at the battle of Chancellorsville in the spring of 1863 stands as one of the most spectacular Southern successes in the Civil War's eastern theater. On May 2, Robert E. Lee boldly divided his outnumbered force to stage an impressive surprise flank attack on Joseph Hooker's Army of the Potomac. The Union defeat was stunning; after weeks of preparing his own offensive, the normally cocky Hooker lost his nerve in the face of Lee's aggression. During the evening of May 2 the Confederate win turned bittersweet when Lee's talented lieutenant, Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson was mortally wounded by friendly fire. The war raged on for two more years, but Chancellorsville marked an important turning point for both armies. Lee would mourn the death of Jackson, and many white Southerners (and their descendants) would insist that losing Jackson lost the war. The Army of the Potomac emerged from this humiliating defeat with surprisingly better organization and esprit de corps, and within two months, better leadership. Federals would not experience another battle quite like Chancellorsville.

Chancellorsville: The Battle and Its Aftermath examines this important battle from a wide variety of fresh perspectives. This is the third book in Gary Gallagher's impressive "Military Campaigns of the Civil War" series, a series that seeks to move beyond traditional military history and expand readers' views toward broader aspects of the battlefield experience. In this volume, Gallagher has assembled eight essays, including one of his own, to explore topics relevant to both the battle and the war as a whole.

Three of the eight essays stand out as especially insightful. John Hennessy's "We Shall Make Richmond Howl: The Army of the Potomac on the Eve of Chancellorsville" presents a fascinating portrait of the Union Army's mood in the months just before Chancellorsville. He argues convincingly that before Hooker took command, soldiers suffered a sort of post-McClellan depression and war-weariness. Hooker brought significant reforms and leadership to the army and transformed this body of men from a discontented, demoralized army to one "healthy, motivated and hopeful" (p. 14). Despite Hooker's failure at Chan-

cellorsville and his eventual removal from command, the positive changes he initiated remained, perhaps explaining the ability of this army to perform so well at Gettysburg just two months later.

Robert K. Krick's "The Smoothbore Volley That Doomed the Confederacy" is an impressive example of true historical detective work. Krick painstakingly reconstructs the setting, actors, and witnesses to Stonewall Jackson's wounding on the night of May 2. This is the best account yet of a well-known but commonly misunderstood event. However, Krick may be too quick to dismiss the mythology that soon arose from Jackson's death. Rejecting such fictional stories as "whoppers," and "foolishness," Krick states that "none of these digressions from the truth has any intrinsic historical significance" (pp. 126, 127). He maintains that these myths merely affirm Jackson's stature and importance to the Confederacy. Recently historians have begun to recognize the rich value of myth, and it seems that much could be learned from these colorful legends Krick is so quick to ignore.

James Marten's "Stern Realities: Children of Chancellorsville and Beyond" is perhaps the most unique of all the essays in this collection. Marten uses two accounts of Chancellorsville written by authors who were children during the battle to explore the war's effects on youth. In strong contrast to Krick's methodological concern with accuracy and truth, Marten demonstrates that although these narratives do not offer anything factually verifiable about the campaign, they remain immensely useful historical sources. Childhood memories can tell us a great deal about the war's changing meaning to its most innocent victims.

The other five essays offer additionally interesting and diverse analyses of participants' memories, suffering, and bravery in battle. Gary Gallagher defends Confederate Major General Jubal Early's leadership at, and postwar recollections of, Second Fredericksburg and Salem Church. A. Wilson Greene critically reassesses the success and

failure of the famed "Stoneman Raid." Carol Rendon praises the gritty performance of Major General Winfield Scott Hancock's First Division on the Union left flank. Keith S. Bohannon tells a Georgia colonel's dramatic story of seeming cowardice under fire. And James I. Robertson reminds readers of the poor medical facilities Southern and Northern armies provided to their sick and wounded. Robertson notes that most generals, including "Fighting" Joe Hooker, "subscribed to the idea that the purpose of war was to tear the body, not to mend it" (p. 177). In spite of the positive reforms Hooker enacted for his troops in camp and in drill, he failed to take into account the needs of the wounded. Hooker shortsightedly forbade army ambulances from being on the field of battle at Chancellorsville.

Anyone who believes that nothing new can be said about Civil War battles will be pleasantly surprised by this book. "In touching on a handful of the myriad facets of this complex event," Gallagher explains in his introduction, "the authors implicitly underscore the fact that many opportunities beckon historians interested in Civil War military campaigns" (p. xv). Indeed, this book demonstrates creative ways that scholars and readers can rethink and reconsider the battlefield experience in the American Civil War.

Copyright (c) 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

[The book review editor for H-CivWar is Daniel E. Sutherland <dsutherl@comp.uark.edu>.]

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

Citation: Lesley J. Gordon. Review of Gallagher, Gary, ed. *Chancellorsville: The Battle and Its Aftermath*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. July, 1996.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=519>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.