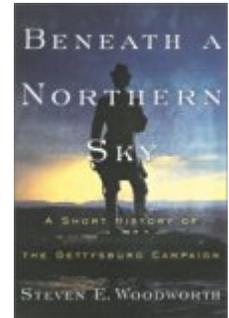


Steven E. Woodworth. *Beneath a Northern Sky: A Short History of the Gettysburg Campaign.* Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2003. xv + 241 pp. \$20.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8420-2933-9.



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Beneath a Northern Sky is a concise account of the Gettysburg campaign, which occurred in the middle of the American Civil War. It is almost certainly unnecessary to note the time of Gettysburg, for this campaign and battle remains the most alarmingly salient event in that war. A corollary is that Steven E. Woodworth's treatment is one of an uncountable number of tellings of this tale. Moreover, several secondary works about Gettysburg have appeared already in this young century. Why conceive and produce *Northern Sky*? Woodworth, a professional historian at Texas Christian University, desired to write a readily digestible story—perhaps against an immediate backdrop of the recent books that each devote many hundreds of pages to the entire campaign or even to one-third of the three-day battle. In this regard, *Northern Sky* is a tertiary account, in a way, which draws heavily on secondary sources, including the contemporary works just alluded to. One way Woodworth tapped into these treatments and other secondary sources was to obtain many of the quotes judiciously sprinkled throughout his ten chapters, by which he includes words of participants in the campaign that were

ferreted out by other historians and writers. There is not only nothing wrong with this, it also connects with the point that Woodworth's treatment is distinctly non-dense: it is largely a narrative that nicely moves the reader along without trying to dazzle such a person with the implication that the author has necessarily marinated himself in the vast quantities of primary research material available for Gettysburg. This kind of heavily researched then densely presented treatment can lead to so many quoted passages that the reader frequently gets bogged down and confused. The total tonnage of such material—along with the big books, smaller ones about Gettysburg micro-events, magazine articles, and on and on—is enough to shatter the imagination of Gettysburg aficionados, who are legion.

Will such persons derive further knowledge and insight about the Battle of Gettysburg, and the events surrounding it in June and July of 1863, from *Northern Sky*? Probably so, because Woodworth does more than provide a strong narrative line. The author pauses frequently to supply interpretations of the events and evaluations of actions

performed by major members of the cast of characters. He takes the Army of the Potomac's commander, Maj. Gen. George Gordon Meade, to task a few times (as on pp. 100, 210); and Woodworth is less admiring of that general's accomplishments at Gettysburg than are "later historians who would praise" this fledgling army commander (p. 204). He cannot help but evaluate Gen. Robert E. Lee's overall performance (on p. 209, for example); but he does not over-analyze it. Matters revolving around how well Lee did during the Gettysburg campaign continue to be churned, but this historical activity may be getting old. With respect to lower-ranking general officers in the campaign, Woodworth wonders aloud whether the Confederate cavalry commander, Maj. Gen. J. E. B. Stuart, truly befouled Rebel fortunes by exiting the major theater of campaign during the last week of June. This goes against the conventional wisdom, but Woodworth is correct to avoid over-emphasizing the negative significance of Stuart's ride around the Army of the Potomac as it marched northward. The author also provides a useful service by suggesting that a potential continuation of the Rebel offensive into the evening of July 1--to take the hills south of Gettysburg itself during the first day of the battle--did not approach dereliction of duty on the part of the Southern general in question (the historically embattled Richard S. Ewell). Additionally, could Lt. Gen. Longstreet's plan, supposedly urged on Lee by this Confederate Corps commander between the night of July 1 and the early hours of the second, have worked? No, argues Woodworth, with some cogent, factually based examination of the Army of Northern Virginia's dubious ability to re-deploy away from Gettysburg, cavalierly to place itself between the Army of the Potomac and more southern sectors of this theater of war. These sample referrals to Woodworth's evaluative passages may suggest faint praise, because those who research Gettysburg then write endlessly about it are analyzing this military event into oblivion. Yet, the author being considered at the moment at

least avoids a pure recycling of the usual and global negativity about the performance of the Confederate high command.

So, Woodworth's forays into Gettysburg analysis are more than enough to keep the mind alert as one works his way through this version of the story. In this respect, *Northern Sky* does not intend to be a work of raw scholarship. Readers of such Gettysburg books not only must absorb the results of weighty research; it also might be the case that they are largely being impressed by the author's reference lists (including the coveted "manuscript" source-listings of obscure primary materials), as opposed to being maximally informed about the subject matter. Instead of being a hefty tome, this book seems aimed as much at the casual reader as at the aforementioned aficionado. The former type of non-fiction consumer is presented with a solid entre to the Gettysburg story and will (however unwittingly) be brought up to date by Woodworth's synthesizing of modern scholarship.

That said, I might quibble with certain details of *Northern Sky's* narrative and whether all features of its explanatory value are up to par. Consider these examples from the early chapters: the Confederate cavalry comes into the story from almost out of nowhere during the account of the marches and rides northward, moreover, the important Loudon Valley battles, during which opposing cavalry forces clashed June 17-21, are given short shrift. The Northern cavalry force near Gettysburg, June 30-July 1, is overestimated as to the number of troopers in Brig. Gen. John Buford's command (p. 43). As the July 1 story proceeds, one wonders whether the famed Gettysburg civilian really did "pick off" Rebel attackers as he (the aged John Burns) attached himself to a Union regiment (p. 78). Subsequently on this Wednesday--as Union commanders began to supervise the defense forming on Cemetery Hill during the retreat of two Federal corps toward and below the town--they did not send as large a force

as "two divisions to Culp's Hill" (p. 96--the prominence located east of Cemetery Hill; Culp's was dangerously undermanned until later). Gettysburg took place during the summer of 1863; thus, most persons writing about it pause to agonize on behalf of the soldiers, about what a "Hell on earth" it must have been (as Woodworth does on p. 105 with regard to the conditions on July 2); in reality, Gettysburg did not heat up climatically until the afternoon of July 3 (in context of June and early July, during 1863 in the East, having been rather cool and rainy). These and a few other claims about micro-events within the Gettysburg story are not all that well attributed in Woodworth's endnotes (appended to each chapter). In fact, scrutinizing the citations makes one wonder sometimes as to how a particular reference specifically backs up the corresponding verbal passage (for example, note 64; it is entered into text on p. 99 and sends the reader to contextually enigmatic citations on p. 103). Moreover, not all quotings of participants' words are attributed (it cannot hurt to know in each case whether such material was written soon after the battle or long after the war). Also, I gingerly recommend to the author that augmenting certain notes with short prose passages might be warranted, to clarify the point or comment on the source.

A related criticism about Woodworth's source material: his bibliographic essay (inserted between the final chapter and the index) is a good idea--better than a whopping list of references about which one can be puzzled as to how the author specifically drew on such-and-such a source (among the hundreds listed without comment)--for whatever component of the text. But despite the relative value of essaying the bibliography, the current author might have tweaked this section just a bit. As it winds up (on p. 223), Woodworth mentions a tiny fraction of the works that deal with something very small (a "single unit" or "individuals" at Gettysburg). Why these narrowly eclectic choices--instead of, for example, mentioning a couple of late-twentieth- and early-twenty-

first-century periodicals? Readers' knowledge of these source materials would take such persons to almost all micro-features of the Gettysburg campaign, should they wish to peruse *Gettysburg* magazine (1989-present) and many issues of *North and South* magazine (1997-present, certain articles in which Woodworth does cite individually).

These perceived problems notwithstanding, the narrative solidity of *Beneath a Northern Sky* prompts me to choose features of the book that nicely move the reader through the core of the battle (July 2 afternoon through that of the next day). Thus, Woodworth supplies good word pictures for the complex battle events involving the massive fighting on the Union left and Rebel right during the late afternoon of July 2 (chapters 6 and 7). His treatment of the battle for Culp's Hill on the Federal right and Confederate left (later on that Thursday) is clear and well emphasized for its significance (end of chapter 7)--not always achieved by Gettysburg writers. As for July 3, and how (or how in the world) did Pickett's Charge get ordered, Woodworth does a fine job unraveling complexities of the original Confederate plans for Friday morning and how they evolved into the then-apparent rationality of an assault upon the Union center (chapter 8). Yet, perhaps the author protests too much when he puts himself into James Longstreet's mind and opines that that Confederate corps commander "simply ... never considered any other possibility" than that the attack would "fail" (p. 170). This may be too much in the ballpark of conventional wisdom: Longstreet's resentment about a supposedly suicidal offensive plan being set in motion, according to some sort of impatient pugnacity on the part of Gen. Lee. Against a background of Woodworth's description of the rationale for the Charge, he might have given a nod to recent scholarship which suggests that the conceptualization of and planning for the July 3 assault was somewhere in hailing distance of high-quality generalship. Could Pickett's Charge have succeeded? Maybe it might have. But be-

cause it was destroyed by an active--not merely a stalwart--Union Federal defense, we'll never know. And it's arguable that analysts of Gettysburg should dial back a bit on their "predicting the past."

Woodworth writes little in this vein--tending to avoid "if X had been tried, Y would have happened, and therefore Z" about the outcome of the battle and campaign. This author aimed principally to describe and clarify the events of Gettysburg in a work than can be absorbed in a small handful of sittings. Much of what happened near that small Pennsylvania town was complicated-and possibly momentous. The latter is still in the minds of many although is nowhere near universally believed by now. That issue aside, I myself understood what Woodworth wrote and appreciated learning new things about Gettysburg from *Northern Sky*--even though I might claim to know "too much" already from studying the campaign and teaching a college-course about it for some years. When I present the story orally, I find it quintessential to augment the account with a host of visual aids. Despite the overall clarity of Woodworth's narrative, I modestly propose that the author could have salted two-to-three times as many maps as he chose to include in the book. Some examples: his "Eastern Theater" map at the beginning does not include Fredericksburg, from where the campaign started in Virginia. Chapter 4 could have used more diagrams to deconvolute description of the actions on July 1. Elements of chapters 6 and 7 necessarily descend into too-complicated sub-stories about July 2 for words alone, even though these passages inform the ordinary reader better than do the dense tomes about Gettysburg (there are three maps within these two *Northern Sky* chapters, but double that number would have helped). As a final illustrative case: If Woodworth decided to include an ever-so-brief account of the battle for the East Cavalry Field on July 3 within chapter 10, he might have

supplied a map that at least would depict where this action occurred.

The previous mentions of Gettysburg "tomes" lead me to conclude that readers potentially interested in this subject should not start with them. You'll be mired in extreme verbal density, and you'll have to plow through staggering numbers of primary-source quotes. Therefore, begin instead with *Beneath a Northern Sky*, especially if you desire to read a clear and rather stirring story about the Battle of Gettysburg. Woodworth's work minimally misleads and strikes a fine balance between too superficial and overly dry, on the one hand, and a case of "more and more about less and less," on the other.

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