

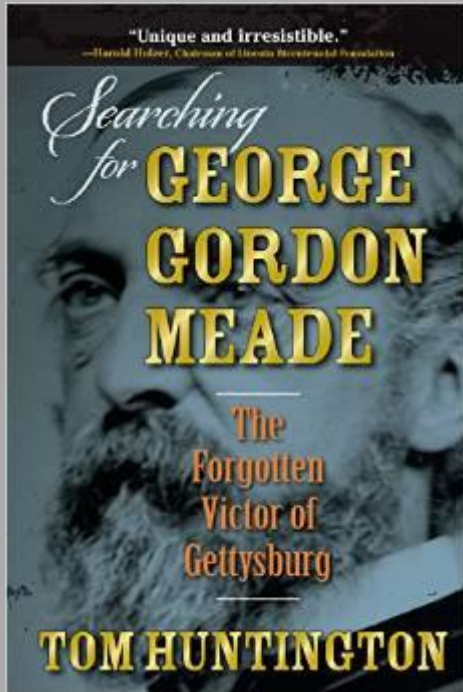
Book Review

Searching for George Gordon Meade

The Forgotten Victor of Gettysburg

By Tom Huntington

(2013) Stackpole Books



I approached this book with some reluctance because it is not written by a Civil War author but instead was written by the editor of a travel magazine. On the other hand I was drawn to this book because Meade has too often been given short or even unfair shift in other biographies or accounts. For instance Alan Guelzo unjustifiably paints Meade as George McClellan's alter ego in *Gettysburg – The Last Invasion* *The Last Invasion*, recklessly blaming Meade for a long list of shortcomings without giving Meade any credit for what he accomplished under extraordinary command circumstances. Several other Gettysburg books tend to treat Meade as just another general among the Federal order of battle or else adopt an Southern point of view, emphasizing the Confederates' brilliant failures of Gettysburg. Thus I began reading Huntington's book in

the hopes that there might be some more positive attributes about this more or less forgotten, or at least often overlooked, general. Huntington's well written book helps to provide much needed balance to the Civil War literature.

Tom Huntington's approach is unique among the hundreds of other Civil War books. Instead of offering a straight biography he merges the life of his subject with accounts of present day journeys that follow Meade's campaigns and battles. Frankly my main interest was to learn more about Meade's Civil War career, and in this respect I was not disappointed since this book is replete with well researched and documented anecdotes about Meade's life as a soldier and commander.

At the start of the war Meade was doing engineering work, specifically building lighthouses in Michigan where some of his political difficulties began. One of Meade's deficiencies was that he failed to realize that a civil war was largely political, and that the military's traditional non-political posture would not always be appreciated when a significant

portion of Regular Army officers were resigning to join the Confederate army. And although Meade had solid family connections in Pennsylvania, he was also a brother-in-law to Henry A. Wise, former governor of Virginia and a leading fire eater from that state. And so when Meade incurred suspicions about his fidelity to the Union at the outbreak of the war when he refused to take a loyalty oath requested by Zachariah Chandler, U.S. Senator from Michigan. Unfortunately for Meade, Chandler later became a member of the Congressional Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War that eventually became a thorn in Meade's side.

Notwithstanding his engineering background Meade soon became in Brigadier General in command of an infantry brigade, beginning as part of McClellan's peninsular campaign where Meade was wounded at the White Oak Swamp. As he does throughout his book Huntington provides an outstanding narration of the campaign while describing the current path of McClellan's attempt to approach Richmond from the east. Huntington's description of Meade's participation is straight forward without unnecessary embellishments or aggrandizement.

Meade slowly but steadily rose through the command structure of the Army of the Potomac until somewhat unexpectedly he was appointed to command the Union's largest, and most important army. Here Huntington takes time to point out the difficult circumstances of the assumption of that assignment, those circumstances including the inheritance of a hostile chief of staff, widely scattered corps, the lack of maps, and little if any planning by his predecessor, Joe Hooker. And of course Meade was suddenly having to contend with an adversary, Robert E. Lee, who had for the most part been giving the Federal army fits for most of the past year. Realizing that a battle with Lee was likely to occur, probably sooner than later, Meade immediately began to consolidate his army while preparing contingency plans and options, all in compliance with his marching orders from Halleck to protect Washington.

As most Civil War buffs know full well, the Gettysburg battles did not start well for Meade's army, especially the first day when two of Meade's corps were overwhelmed by Lee's attacking forces. But the tides of war turned for the better for the Federal defenders, in no small part because of Meade's resolute and skillful management of his army, until the bloody repulse of the so-called Pickett's Charge on the third day of the battle. As events and circumstances would further unfold, that battle, only five days after taking army command, became the pinnacle of Meade's career. However Huntington, as he does for other battlegrounds, takes us on several beautifully described tours of the entire battlefield, nicely refreshing the memories of anyone who has previously toured the Gettysburg battleground, or perhaps to prepare anyone intending to take a similar tour in the future.

And as well known, despite a vigorous, dogged pursuit Lee managed to escape across the Potomac, much to Lincoln's disappointment. Huntington relies upon two of the leading authorities on the issue of the pursuit, Brown, Kent Masterson Brown's. *Retreat, from*

Gettysburg – Lee, Logistics, & the Pennsylvania Campaign and Eric Wittenberg and other's. *One Continuous Fight – The Retreat from Gettysburg and the Pursuit of Lee's Army of Northern Virginia*. These sources are important because they make in-depth, objective analyses without extensive efforts to cast blame or find scape goats as do several other treatments of the unsuccessful pursuit. Again, as he does in several other instances, Huntington retraces Lee's escape route to discover how difficult any pursuit was going to be.

The period following the Gettysburg campaign must have one of frustration for Meade who might not have been temperamentally suited for army command. Much seemed to have been expected by the Washington authorities who were also loathe to provide any meaningful direction except to protect Washington. Units were detached from Meade's army to subdue draft riots in New York City and later to reinforce the Western armies in the Chattanooga region. A couple of Meade's best corps commanders were either killed or severely wounded, while one replacement, William French, was totally unfit for corps command.

Furthermore, Meade was blindsided by the aforementioned Joint Committee that was always looking for ways to second guess Regular Army commanders, especially West Point graduates, whom the committee suspected were not fully committed to the Radical Republican agenda. Almost immediately after Gettysburg, various generals with their own agendas began to submit criticisms of Meade's actions before, during, and after the battle giving the committee all the ammunition it needed to compel Meade to testify, something for which he was basically unprepared.

And then there was the appointment of U.S. Grant as General in Chief. According to Huntington, Grant and Meade had a generally cordial, professional relationship. However Grant's decision to establish his headquarters along with Meade's army inevitably led to difficulties, especially between the respective staffs. Furthermore Grant quickly undercut Meade's authority when Grant not only failed to discipline Phil Sheridan for his gross insubordination at Todd's Tavern but also agreed to detach Sheridan and his cavalry from Meade's command, a decision that proved costly as the Army of the Potomac was frequently without its eyes and ears. Although not a major focus, this book also includes some instances that do not reflect favorably upon Grant's loyalty to Meade.

Huntington also takes a minority position when he asserts that regardless of these awkward command relationships Meade maintained essential command management and control of the Army of the Potomac, at least until the pursuit to Appomattox when Sheridan assumed a further degree of tactical control.

Huntington does not attempt to elevate Meade to the status of one of the great military commanders in our history. He freely concedes some of Meade's shortcomings including a sour disposition and an extremely short fused temper. However, Huntington argues most strenuously that Meade has been shortchanged in recognition for what Meade did accomplish under difficult, trying circumstances. As might be expected of a travel editor viewing the

battlefield, Huntington notes the incongruity of Meade's statue at Gettysburg paling in comparison to the size of Lee's forty foot monument. And I personally appreciate Huntington's critique that two on the Army's largest bases, Hood and Bragg, are named in honor of two of the worst Confederate generals in contrast to a much smaller sized Fort Meade.

Is this book worth its purchase price and the time that it takes to read it? Without any doubt most Civil War aficionados, either Union or Confederate oriented, will take considerable enjoyment from the numerous insights and reflections provided by this author. It is a refreshing, worthwhile addition to Civil War libraries of any size.