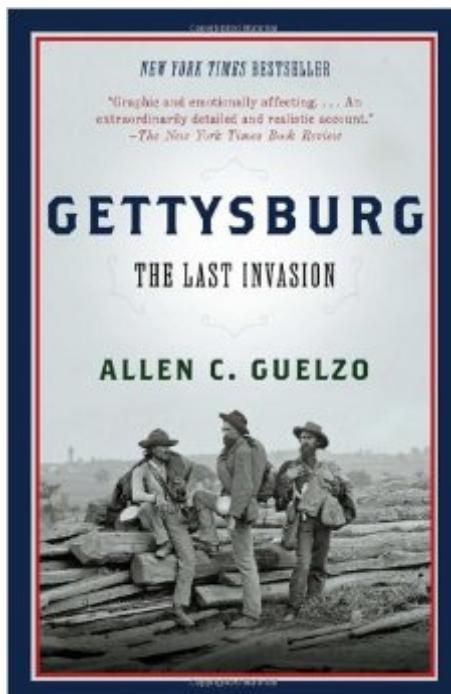


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Gettysburg: The Last Invasion (Vintage Civil War Library)



Synopsis

Winner of the Guggenheim-Lehrman Prize in Military HistoryAn Economist Best Book of the YearA Kirkus Reviews Best Nonfiction Book of the YearThe Battle of Gettysburg has been written about at length and thoroughly dissected in terms of strategic importance, but never before has a book taken readers so close to the experience of the individual soldier. Two-time Lincoln Prize winner Allen C. Guelzo shows us the face, the sights and the sounds of nineteenth-century combat: the stone walls and gunpowder clouds of Pickett's Charge; the reason that the Army of Northern Virginia could be smelled before it could be seen; the march of thousands of men from the banks of the Rappahannock in Virginia to the Pennsylvania hills. What emerges is a previously untold story of army life in the Civil War: from the personal politics roiling the Union and Confederate officer ranks, to the peculiar character of artillery units. Through such scrutiny, one of history's epic battles is given extraordinarily vivid new life.

Book Information

Series: Vintage Civil War Library

Paperback: 672 pages

Publisher: Vintage; Reprint edition (February 11, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0307740692

ISBN-13: 978-0307740694

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 1.4 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.3 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars See all reviews (464 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

I was torn over purchasing this book inasmuch as I thought that the last thing I needed was another general treatment of the Gettysburg Campaign. Nevertheless, I ended up buying "Gettysburg: The Last Invasion," and started reading it dutifully until, realizing the great book I had in my hands, I enthusiastically devoured it in a day or so. While the book doesn't really break much new ground insofar as the Gettysburg campaign and battle are concerned, Prof Guelzo nevertheless

approaches the subject from a slightly different perspective compared to many other historians. Thus, I was intrigued by his presentation of the Army of the Potomac's internal politics and how he demonstrated that the battles between the pro and anti McClellan camps were concurrently (and perhaps primarily) those between conservative Democrats and Abolitionists. I also enjoyed how Prof Guelzo presented the internal politics of the Army of Northern Virginia as revolving around a (perceived?) bias towards Virginians and those who were "politically correct" toward secession (that is, enthusiastically in favor of it). I also appreciated how the issue of slavery and the experience (and plight) of free blacks in the path of the invasion was a thread interwoven throughout the narrative. In addition, I thought the biographical vignettes of the major players, being both bitingly provocative and perceptive, were a particular highlight. With regard to the battle itself, I thought the way Prof Guelzo laid out the battle in his presentation was both accurate and coherent. While the book does not go into great tactical detail there is enough there for a general survey and what is there is powerful and insightful.

I am not sure why this book has received so many 4 and 5 star reviews. To be sure, Professor Guelzo is an unquestioned expert on the details of the battle. The depth of knowledge and detail here is stunning. However, this detail is the very reason that the book is tedious and a real struggle to get through. I am a former military officer and as such have spent a good deal of time studying battles, history, tactics and strategy, and I'm not sure I have ever read a drier account of any battle than this one. The book is somewhere between a tactical history of the battle and a strategic overview of the campaign. Neither objective is achieved. As mentioned, the detail is impressive, to the regiment level and below. But because of that detail, there is no real sense of the overall strategic decisions pursued by the commanders. Perhaps because of his detailed knowledge, Professor Guelzo writes in a fairly condescending manner, seemingly in an attempt to 'unlearn' his readers from what they thought they knew. Central to this, are several discussions about how the rifle didn't have nearly the impact that it was thought to have, mainly because it was inaccurate. A rather ridiculous analysis of how many rounds of ammunition needed to be fired before actually hitting a soldier is conducted, with a subtle tone suggesting that it really wasn't that bad to be a soldier. Whatever the numbers are or how they were calculated, the fact is that roughly 1 in 4 soldiers were killed or wounded in the battle. I would not have wanted to be there.

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