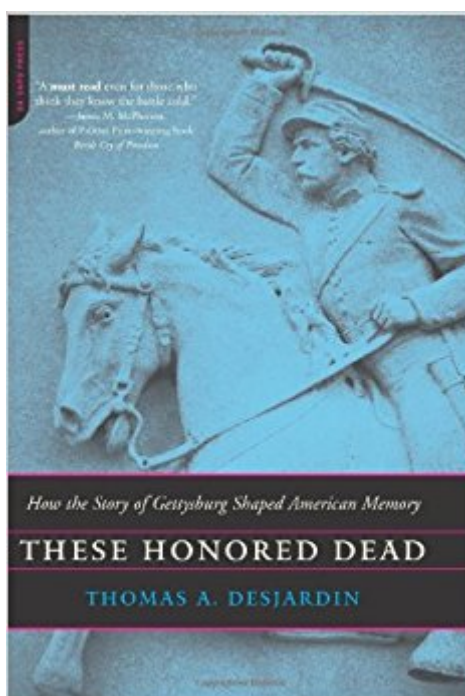


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These Honored Dead: How The Story Of Gettysburg Shaped American Memory



Synopsis

Ever since the guns of Gettysburg fell silent, and Lincoln delivered his famous two-minute speech four months after the battle, the story of this three-day conflict has become an American legend. We remember Gettysburg as, perhaps, the biggest, bloodiest, and most important battle ever fought—the defining conflict in American history. But how much truth is behind the legend? In *These Honored Dead*, Thomas A. Desjardin, a prominent Civil War historian and a perceptive cultural observer, demonstrates how flawed our knowledge of this enormous event has become, and why. He examines how Americans, for seven score years, have shaped, used, altered, and sanctified our national memory, fashioning the story of Gettysburg as a reflection of, and testimony to, our culture and our nation.

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Customer Reviews

In George Bernard Shaw's *Devil's Disciple*, British general Burgoyne faces certain defeat at Saratoga. A subordinate asks him how history will view the event. History, Burgoyne states, "will tell lies, as usual." Desjardin is a historian and an archivist at Gettysburg. In this intriguing look at the reliability of many of the assumed truths about the Battle of Gettysburg, he does not accuse "history" or individuals of deliberate deceit. Rather, he convincingly asserts that the memories of battle participants, many of them recorded a decade later, are fragmentary and often contradictory. Faced with confusing recollections, historians often chose to select those accounts that satisfied their own preconceptions. As their accounts were written and repeated over decades, they received

the aura of sanctified truth. For example, what really happened on the second day at Little Round Top? Did Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain really "save the Union" with an unorthodox charge? In dissecting various accounts, Desjardin skillfully illustrates how hazy memories of the fog of battle are gradually codified into accepted fact. An excellent addition to Civil War collections. Jay Freeman
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"Intriguing look at the reliability of many of the assumed truths about the Battle of Gettysburg"

This is actually a pretty unique book on Gettysburg in that it's not a study of the battle itself but of the history of the battle and how people's perceptions of Gettysburg have been shaped over time. Tom Desjardin does a wonderful job of looking at some of the more famous parts of the battle such as Little Round Top and The High Water Mark and explaining why and how they became focal points. Many myths are explored and how they came into being such as the myth that the Confederates were a ragged shoeless army (They were actually well equipped). Sickles' endless campaign after the battle to smear Meade's reputation also gets a close look as well as the evolution of the 20th Maine's role in the battle thanks to the book *Killer Angels* and the film *Gettysburg*. The book also has some interesting info about the monuments on the field. We learn why the Armistead marker is in the wrong place, why the statue on the 83rd Pennsylvania monument looks so much like Stono Vincent and why there is no statue to Sickles on the Battlefield (Sickles embezzled the money!). Lastly Tom Desjardin is just a plain good writer. To many books on history these days are written by people who while they do good research don't have great writing skills. Desjardin however is as good a writer as he is a scholar and the result is a very pleasant read.

Having a great-great grandfather who fought in the Battle of Gettysburg, I have more than a passing interest in this Civil War battle. After reading Thomas A. Desjardin's *These Honored Dead: How the Story of Gettysburg Shaped American Memory*, I learned that much of what we believe about this pivotal battle is incorrect. Desjardin goes into great detail on how and why our take on this battle has changed over the years. "The truth about Gettysburg is buried beneath layer upon layer of flawed human memory and our attempts to fashion our past into something that makes our present a little easier to live in." There are all kinds of myths that have been passed down, including that General Lee led his Confederates to Gettysburg because it was the location of a shoe factory (it wasn't) or

that Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg Address on the back of an envelope (he didn't). Many errors can be attributed to the fog of war. "Adrenaline, chaos, confusion, noise, anger, pain, blood--all capture the mind's focus when one's life is on the line in combat." Other errors can be connected to the fact that most Civil War soldiers waited until 20 years or more after the war before writing their version of events. Many eye-witnesses wrote to put their "spin" on the battle, or to make specific leaders or regiments look good. General Dan Sickles, who created a major blunder on Day 2, spent the rest of his long life claiming that his actions were the result of mistakes made by General George Meade (they weren't). In some situations, art is responsible for these untruths. The famous Gettysburg Cyclorama was painted by French artist, Paul Philippoteaux. It shows a definite French influence including "French-style hay bales," Union soldiers "wearing the white-legged uniforms of the French army," and wounded soldiers being transported from the battlefield in French "two-seated mule-borne apparatus." In 1994, the movie Gettysburg made its television debut. In commentary before the film, Ted Turner states that 50,000 men died at Gettysburg--more than the entire Viet Nam War. Actually, only 10,000 died at Gettysburg, although millions of Americans think otherwise, thanks to Turner. My husband and I saw first-hand how such errors were made. My great-great grandfather fought with the Pennsylvania 115th Infantry, which saw action on Day 2 in the Wheat Field. The PA 115th monument can be found there. On my last visit, I had a personal guide who was very knowledgeable about the Wheat Field. He informed me that the PA 115th actually fought on the other side of a small stream. But when monuments were being erected, that ground was still private land. So the monument is not correctly placed. These Honored Dead has definitely changed the way I look at the Battle of Gettysburg.

Any student of the Civil War who seeks the basic knowledge and the events behind the events would find, in my opinion, this to be a phenomenal read. It has placed a new hue over the event in my eyes and now many aspects of the behaviors of the officers both during and after the event make sense to me. The key point is that the participants were men--simply men. Their motivations were driven by many emotions and aspirations. Some of these were altruistic. Some of these were selfish and self-serving. The author provides the back story and makes the case that you should not believe everything you see or read. I will be visiting the battlefield again, as I have done a number of times over the years. Except, this time I will have more questions about what actually happened. This battle is so important to some of us because it was the turning point not just in the war, but in the nation that resulted. It is more than just a battle. For the men who fought there, the events over 3 days affected their perspectives and even their lives for the rest of their lives. How many of us can

identify the events of 3 days in our existences that affected how we behave for the rest of our lives?Extraordinary.

A story about the stories. Great comments on the research and passing f stories which turn into popular legends. Reminds you of the telephone game from middle school and how the truth rarely makes it to the end.

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