American History Through Literature

GETTYSBURG

EARL SCHENCK MIERS
RICHARD A. BROWN

A new edition
with a foreword
by JAMES I.
ROBERTSON, JR.

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GETTYSBURG

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For

Alan E. James

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Series Foreword

Novelists, poets, and essayists often use history to illuminate their understanding of human interaction. At times these works also illuminate our history. They also help us better understand how people in different times and places thought about their own world. Popular novels are themselves artifacts of history.

This series is designed to bring back into print works of literature—in the broadest sense of the term—that illuminate our understanding of U.S. history. Each book is introduced by a major scholar, who places the book in a context, and also offers some guidance to reading the book as "history." The editor will show us where the author of the book has been in error, as well as where the author is accurate. Each reprinted work also includes a few documents to illustrate the historical setting of the work itself.

Books in this series will primarily fall into three categories. First, we will reprint works of "historical fiction"—books that are essentially works of history in a fictional setting. Rather than simply fiction about the past, each will be first-rate history presented through the voices of fictional characters, or through fictional presentations of real characters in ways that do not distort the historical record. Second, we will reprint works of fiction, poetry, and other forms of literature that are primary sources of the era in which they were written. Finally, we will republish nonfiction such as autobiographies, reminiscences, essays, and journalistic exposés, and even works of history that also fall into the general category of literature.

Paul Finkelman

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Foreword

It was just a dot on the map: a small, pleasant town lying amid the rolling hills and broad, shallow valleys of central Pennsylvania. A mountain chain loomed twenty miles to the west. The major reason the little community of twenty-four hundred people existed and flourished was the ten roads leading into it from all points of the compass. Among its few shops and businesses was a warehouse containing shoes. They were badly needed by the barefooted army that Gen. Robert E. Lee guided on a major Confederate invasion of the North in the Civil War's third year.

The name of the town was Gettysburg. For the first three days of July 1863, the principal armies of North and South waged a struggle there—one so furious in its intensity and so important in its consequences that it remains the most famous battle in American history. Some 163,000 soldiers (average age: twenty-four) and their officers (average age: forty-one) engaged in a level of combat none of them had ever imagined war to be. When the smoke cleared, over 51,000 men were dead, wounded, or missing.

Burial details were still at work four months later when President Abraham Lincoln of the Union came to Gettysburg to make a few appropriate remarks at the dedication of a new national cemetery. His Gettysburg Address proved to be timeless in its sentiments. No public utterance in American statesmanship is better known or more deeply revered.

Many consider the struggle at Gettysburg to be the climactic moment of the Civil War. The battle marked the coming-of-age of the Northern Army of the Potomac; it was a stunning rebuff of a Confederate offensive born in great part of desperation. A third of Lee's army melted away in the heat of combat. Seventeen of fifty-two Southern generals were casualties. The spirit of invincibility that had swirled around the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia vanished, along with its offensive mettle. Thereafter, Lee would wage a defensive war against overwhelming resources and newfound Union optimism. It was the very type of war that the South could not hope to win.

Gettysburg may or may not have been the apex of the nation-building contest of the 1860s, but it was unquestionably one of the

Civil War's major turning points. The fighting was filled with courage and fraught with controversy. Strangely, this huge battle was not planned in advance.

Lee's army was driving north through Pennsylvania; Gen. George G. Meade's Union army was giving strong pursuit. Following different roads that led to the junction at Gettysburg, elements of the two hosts collided. Simple contact brought instant combat because the stakes were so high on both sides. For three days thereafter, Confederates launched a series of attacks against a Union line that ran north to south in the shape of an inverted question mark.

The first action occurred west of town along McPherson's Ridge. Confederate assaults from a second front drove the Federals through Gettysburg to Cemetery Ridge, a shallow range of high ground immediately south of the village (and so named because the town burying ground was there). Lee had won the first round, but not by a wide margin.

On the second day, Southern units assailed the flanks of the Northern troops at Culp's Hill and on Little Round Top. The attacks were disjointed and badly timed. Nevertheless, the intense fighting of that day added blood-soaked names to American military annals: Devil's Den, the Wheatfield, the Peach Orchard. Round two went to the Union side, but at great cost.

By that nightfall, both armies were battered but intact. The decision at Gettysburg still hung in the balance. Both generals had to finish the violence that had been unleashed. Lee assumed that the Union center was weak because of the transfer of soldiers to the hard-pressed flanks. The Southern commander determined to renew the offensive the following day by striking the Federal center. Across the way, Meade predicted exactly what Lee's next move would be. He adjusted his lines accordingly.

July 3 brought the most famous assault in the Western Hemisphere. It began shortly before three o'clock on a bright, hot afternoon. Two Confederate divisions under Gens. George Pickett and Johnston Pettigrew moved paradelike across fourteen hundred yards of open ground toward the middle of a reinforced Union line.

It took only forty minutes to decide the issue. The Pickett–Pettigrew Charge was a fight between human gallantry and inhuman machinery—a contest between men charging bravely against massed artillery and concentrated musketry with a clear field of fire. The flower of Southern manhood disappeared in the face of Northern

determination. Five of every eight Confederates in the attack were killed, wounded, or captured.

When Meade received word that the assault had been repulsed, all he could say was: "Thank God." A downcast Lee observed: "All this has been my fault. . . . This has been a sad day for us."

After darkness on July 4, as rain drenched the mangled countryside, Lee led his men southward in retreat. The battle of Gettysburg and the Southern hopes for a successful end to the war were history. Yet echoes from Gettysburg would ring through the ages.

Civil War buffs have never tired of arguing over the performances of the major figures in the battle: Lee committing his small army to combat on ground of the enemy's choosing, A.P. Hill's impetuosity, George G. Meade's repeated vacillations, James Longstreet's slowness, Richard Ewell's hesitations, Daniel E. Sickles's recklessness, "Jeb" Stuart's absence, and other modern second-guessing. The three-day engagement offers almost endless fodder for speculation as well as admiration. Small wonder that interest in the struggle has never waned.

One war always calls attention to another. The heroism and heartache of World War II caused Americans to begin reflecting anew on their past, especially the contest between North and South. Gettysburg became an immediate focal point, and Earl Schenck Miers stepped forward as one of the pathbreakers in a new wave of popular interest in the Civil War.

Miers was a remarkable individual. Born May 27, 1910, in Brooklyn, he was the son of a house painter–janitor and an English immigrant. Miers suffered brain damage at birth. The result was athetosis, a form of cerebral palsy. His parents, despite their limited means, pursued every medical avenue in search of a miracle cure for what was then called "the shakes." The quest was in vain. Miers spent a lifetime coping with his affliction.

He adjusted masterfully. While attending public schools in Brooklyn and in Hackensack, New Jersey, Miers learned not only to read quickly and to absorb easily but also to compensate for poor handwriting with a typewriter. That machine became his outlet; his grandmother's stories of the Revolutionary War and her remembrances of the Civil War became his inspirations. Miers determined to become a writer.

Success first came with short stories published before he had reached his fifteenth year. While a junior in high school, he worked

part-time as a local newspaper reporter. That ultimately brought Miers eighteen hundred dollars and a chance to go to college. He entered Rutgers University on the eve of the 1929 Great Depression. Not content merely with meeting curriculum requirements, and in spite of his handicap, Miers pursued extracurricular activities to an almost full-time extent. Editing the college newspaper, writing student shows, serving as a member of the student council and honorary society, and working as a correspondent for several New York and New Jersey newspapers were among his "outside" endeavors.

Following graduation with a bachelor's degree in journalism, Miers went to work for the public relations department at Rutgers. He married Starling Wyckoff, who bore him two sons and a daughter. In 1943, Rutgers conferred upon Miers an honorary master of arts degree. The next year, he founded and became first director of the Rutgers University Press. This new duty was quite comfortable for Miers, for by then he had published four books for adults and three others for juveniles. It was while with the Rutgers press that Miers produced his first Civil War study, *Gettysburg.*

The battle had long fascinated him. Recognizing that not much new information existed on the struggle and that the best accounts had already been written by eyewitnesses, Miers settled on a novel approach. He would let those who fought the battle tell its story. His task would be to select and correlate the accounts with headers and a running narrative to provide cohesion. A graduate student and university press colleague, Richard A. Brown, agreed to collect the materials needed.

This approach now goes by many names—compilation history, readers, scissors-and-paste books, to name a few—but Miers was the first in modern times to attempt it with Civil War history. He proved quite good at it. Miers combined some of the more revealing of the old memoirs (by such observers as Arthur J.L. Fremantle, Frank A. Haskell, and James Longstreet) with more recently published recollections (such as those by W.W. Blackford, John Dooley, and Cornelia Hancock). The result was fresh, human, solid history.

Ninety-two excerpts follow the Gettysburg campaign chronologically. The approach to battle by both sides, the many and bloody stages of the conflict itself, and the traumatic aftermath, all receive full attention. Ten maps provide easy reference points for the most amateur of Civil War students.

Praise of *Gettysburg* at its 1948 publication was widespread. The *New York Times Book Review* termed the work "the very best collection of firsthand accounts, written by soldiers and civilians" about the 1863 battle, because the scores of quotations offered a "richness of texture, time and place that most narrative histories fail to achieve." More than that, Miers's composite account served as a model for a number of later works, including Henry Steele Commager's two-volume *The Blue and the Gray.*

It also was but the first of a long line of Civil War studies Miers wrote thereafter. The more notable titles include *The General Who Marched to Hell* (1951), *The Living Lincoln* (1955), *The Web of Victory* (1955), *Robert E. Lee, a Great Life in Brief* (1956), *The Great Rebellion* (1958), *Lincoln Day by Day* (three volumes, 1960), *Tragic Years, 1861–1865* (1960), *Ride to War* (1961), and *New Jersey and the Civil War* (1964).

Among Miers's literary assets was the ability to turn a memorable phrase. "Death," he wrote, "is part of war—sometimes the easiest part." He once spoke of a Union officer who displayed "unflinching duty in an age when, among the battle-scarred hills of Virginia, democracy and freedom stood on trial before the world." In one of his last books, Miers noted: "We live with our memories—these memories which, as Walt Whitman said, are so 'unspeakably and forever precious.' "

Miers's career took an upswing in keeping with his productivity. In 1949 he became an editor, first for New York publisher Alfred A. Knopf and then for the World Publishing Company. After four years of working with other people's manuscripts, Miers saw that he preferred authorship to editorship. He retired to concentrate on historical research and writing.

To say merely that Miers was prolific would be an understatement. In his career, he turned out over a hundred books and pamphlets, plus twenty-four introductions and special articles for other publications. Two of Miers's booklets were for the National Society for Crippled Children and Adults and bore the titles *Why Did This Have to Happen?* and *Cerebral Palsy.* He devoted much time to the Easter Seal Society and never refused an invitation to speak to groups interested in physical handicaps and rehabilitation.

In personality, he was outgoing, intense, and convivial. His friendship was genuine and enduring. A bright sense of humor often ap-

peared in public. Presiding over a Civil War symposium, Miers introduced a speaker by observing that the gentleman was "going to talk about the battle front in twenty minutes, whether he knows it or not."

His unquenchable energy was a leading characteristic. He was always working on a book-length treatment of some historical subject. Honorary degrees from Lincoln College and Rutgers served only to increase his output. Yet failing health in the late 1960s steadily curbed his activities. On November 17, 1972, Miers died at his Edison, New Jersey, home. He was sixty-two.

All authors remember their first book with a special, sentimental fondness. Miers was no exception with his entry into Civil War history. Various aspects of the conflict (especially Gen. William T. Sherman) intrigued him, but he never got completely away from Gettysburg. The battle continued to mesmerize him as it had its participants.

Gettysburg haunts us still. It is the most visited of all the battlefield parks maintained by the National Park Service. Over two million people walk its fields each year, many of them making an "annual pilgrimage." Books and articles on the battle flow regularly from presses. Television productions, a full-length movie, at least one periodical—all are constant reminders of what happened there.

Gettysburg was the largest military engagement ever fought in the Western Hemisphere. The struggle was one of the bloodiest in the annals of man. That battle proved to be the costliest Confederate defeat of the war. On the retreat to Virginia, Lee's ambulance wagons stretched a full seven miles. The Northern Army of the Potomac, having previously suffered one defeat after another, won—and won clearly—a smashing victory. The Southern Army of Northern Virginia began a downward journey that would lead ultimately in 1865 to Appomattox Court House. Lincoln would tell the world what Gettysburg meant for the American dream of union.

For Johnny Rebs and Billy Yanks, Gettysburg was a test of what soldiers can bring themselves to attempt and what they can force themselves to endure. The major lesson from that great contest in Pennsylvania is the unforgettable one of men who demonstrated that they loved their country more than they loved their own lives.

We remember, because it would be profane to forget.

James I. Robertson, Jr.

Introduction

CITIZENS OF PHILADELPHIA: Prepare to defend your homes. The traitors who have spread desolation in the southern counties of your State, and carried into captivity free men and women, because they were black and under your protection, approach your city. Their strategy is sufficiently well understood to make it certain that their object is Philadelphia. Do the citizens of the Quaker City expect more favorable treatment at their hands than others? Arise now in your might; shake off your apathy, and show, by rallying rapidly and arming yourselves to meet the enemy and drive him back, that you deserve the blessings of a home. To stand idly now would invite suspicion either of treachery or cowardice. I urge upon the citizens of Philadelphia that they close all places of manufacture by noon, and all other places of business at three o'clock P.M. of each day, devoting the remainder of the day to military organization and instruction. Let companies of from sixty to a hundred men each be rapidly organized, and having chosen their officers, let them report their organization at headquarters, and stand ready at a moment's notice. There is not a moment to be lost, and therefore let us not squander away valuable time.

N. J. T. DANA, *Major-Gen. Commanding.*

With the issuance of this address on Saturday, June 27, 1863, Philadelphians faced the fact that the invasion of Pennsylvania by the Army of Northern Virginia was more than a succession of ugly rumors. Twelve days earlier Governor Curtin had proclaimed to the State that the Rebel forces, flushed with their victories at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville, had crossed the Potomac; and even the laconic report in *The New York Times* for June 28 that "the return game between the Army of the Potomac and the Army of Virginia may be played this week" could not disguise the mounting apprehension with which the country awaited the outcome of

Lee's audacious move. When at last the issue was finally resolved the focal point of conflict was a drowsy little college town of not many more than two thousand inhabitants. Few periods in American history were to become more indelibly inscribed upon the nation's heart than the bloody days of July 1, 2, and 3 at Gettysburg. Said Abraham Lincoln: ". . . we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

Gettysburg's immortality was forever consecrated in these simple words spoken by a war-weary President. As Lincoln arose to speak his few humble sentences he must have seemed a lean, unhappy, self-conscious man to those who remembered that his presence at this dedication of Gettysburg Cemetery as a national shrine had been an afterthought. But throughout his life Lincoln possessed a genius for epic visions, and he could see one now: In Little Round Top and Big Round Top, in Devil's Den, in the Peach Orchard and the Wheatfield, in Cemetery Ridge and the Bloody Angle, in the whole expanse of rolling country where the men of South Carolina had died beside the men of Massachusetts, and the men of Virginia and Texas had died beside the men of Maine and Vermont. In death there was no longer Rebellion; on fields where the red-cedar canteens of an agricultural South lay beside the tin canteens of an industrial North there remained only the promise that "another spring shall green these trampled slopes, and flowers, planted by unseen hands, shall bloom upon these graves."

This book is designed to re-create the story of Gettysburg in terms of the men and women who lived through the anxiety of the invasion and the battle. From diaries, letters, yellowing manuscripts, regimental histories, and the memoirs of generals and soldiers the editors have sought to reconstruct the emerging narrative of those decisive days. There appeared no need to offer the reader simply another military history of Gettysburg, for that task has been well performed at least a score of times. Instead the editors have concerned themselves with the human document of Gettysburg: Why these men of the

North and South fought and died here, what mean or noble thoughts motivated their acts, what passions and compassions stirred their hearts. To the testimony of generals and their lieutenants the editors have given patient attention, but no more so than to the testimony of the foot soldier or the cannoneer, the housewife or the farm boy.

Since all history is lived in half truth, the reader who follows this unfolding of the story of Gettysburg will not be dismayed by the contradictions that are sometimes apparent in the recollections of various participants. The impression of facts rather than the facts themselves motivate the events of history, and that is why history as written after years of research and reflection is often more truthful than the actual experience of history. The professional historian, gathering all the evidence around him, deals with reality after it has emerged and thus is enabled to speculate upon what might have been. In this respect the historian cannot dispute that he plays a game of detection and inductive reasoning denied to the housewife who hears with dread the rumors of a hostile invasion or to the exhausted foot soldier who watches the enemy advance across a field and believes as he clutches his rifle that he and his company are hopelessly outnumbered.

The essential differenec between this narrative and the more formal work of history is in the fact that by presenting the story of Gettysburg through one hundred excerpts from the testimony of forty-five witnesses the reader is not deprived of sharing in the historian's adventure of evaluating how much is truth and how much is impression. If any word of caution is necessary it is merely that the reader must learn to judge individual selections by their internal evidence, giving one value to those which were written within a matter of hours or days after the events they describe, and another value to those that were recorded years afterward when memory may have become dimmed or when later knowledge may have colored the recollection of events. It seems safe to assume that every reader will quickly understand and thus forgive the personal bias and the human tendency toward self-vindication that sometimes creep into such sources of history.

But aside from these simple cautions, the editors have no

hesitancy in inviting the reader to find in this book both the story of Gettysburg and the adventure of discovering at least in part the historical truth behind the events that took place there. The quest in the end will become a search for those human elements that make the unpredictable believable, and even the unbelievable comprehensible.

The substance of this book, if not its form, was suggested by Douglas Southall Freeman, who graciously examined the list of sources from which the final selections were made. Paul M. Angle, Director of the Chicago Historical Society, read the manuscript in its entirety and gave it not only the critical scrutiny of the professional historian but also the incisively candid analysis of a good editor. To Mark Kiley, Librarian of the New York University Club, must go special expression of gratitude for direction to sources relatively unknown, even to specialists in the field; and the editors are similarly indebted to Frederick Tilberg, Historian of the Library of the Gettysburg National Military Park, and to the library staffs at Rutgers University, Columbia University, Princeton University, and the New York and Newark Public Libraries. In the end, however, this book could never have existed without the faithful guardianship of Miss Alva E. Flood, who lived with it for more than two years, typing and retyping the manuscript, collating sources, and tracking down correct spellings until both she and I were on the verge of tears. For the most part the research that has gone into this work was performed by Richard A. Brown; the editorial work was performed by the undersigned, who must bear the entire responsibility for its shortcomings.

The sources from which all selections in this book have been taken are listed under *References* at the end of the text. The listing, which follows the same order in which the selections appear, is by short title only. Full titles, with other bibliographical information, will be found in the *Bibliography*.

EARL SCHENCK MIERS

Edison, New Jersey
January 3, 1948

Gettysburg

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