

2018 Dennis E. Frye Visiting Scholar of Civil War Studies Report

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*“Distant Thunder: The Fighting Men, Material Culture, and Contested Memories of
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Winston Churchill wrote famously that the Battle of Gettysburg was one of the greatest battles fought by English-speaking peoples in “the noblest and least avoidable of all the great mass-conflicts of which till then there was record.”¹ The residual power of that battle, and of its complex memory, continues to command the historical imaginations of visitors who flock to its fields. I first visited the battlefield at Gettysburg as a young boy after I had read Michael Shaara’s *The Killer Angels*.² Since that time, for leisure, for pleasure, to strengthen my sense of connection to the American past, and to honor the sacrifices of those Americans who, in the words of the Redeemer President, gave their “last full measure of devotion” for the Union, I have made numerous visits to Gettysburg.³ Most recently, and as the 2018 Dennis E. Frye Visiting Scholar of Civil War Studies, I had the honor to return to Gettysburg once again, to consider once more the horrors and the heroism of that battle which, while inconsequential in any grand strategic sense to the outcome of the American Civil War, continue to fire the historical and moral imaginations of Americans resident North and South.

In this report I will address several ways in which the seminar program complemented my research concerning United States Major General of Volunteers John Fulton Reynolds and honed my thinking about the Battle of Gettysburg. As the architect

¹ Winston S. Churchill, *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, in four volumes (New York: Dodd and Mead, 1956), 4: 263.

² Michael Shaara, *The Killer Angels* (New York: Modern Library, 2004).

³ Language adapted from Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address*, contained in Lincoln, *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings*, edited by Roy P. Basler, and with a preface by Carl Sandburg (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1946), 734.

of the battle, and as the battle's preeminent Federal casualty, Reynolds merits recognition as a consequential figure in the history of the American Civil War. Enshrined in the nation's public memory, and celebrated in Battle of Gettysburg lore, Reynolds remains a complex figure most remembered for how he perished. Curiously, for his central role in making certain the clash of Union and Confederate arms in Adams County Pennsylvania on July 1st, 1863, the memory of Reynolds is overshadowed in Gettysburg lore by other Federal figures whose memories have grown to command more attention in the public's historical consciousness since the fateful days of July 1st through 3rd 1863. My doctoral thesis examines these themes and a host of others in an attempt to bring the life, professional military career, religious values, political views, and Civil War command of General Reynolds to life.

Gratitude

First things first: I wish to thank Mr. Dennis Frye for endowing my scholarship, and for making possible, in a real financial sense, my participation in the program. Mr. Frye's passion for Civil War history, his vast knowledge of battlefield sites and battle studies, and his enthusiasm for sharing Civil War history with academic and popular audiences is commendable; his passion for history has made me more keenly aware of the reality that historians, public and academic, are but mere stewards of historical knowledge in all its complexity, and that a knowledge of the past must be loved, preserved, nurtured, and shared. A meaningful knowledge of the American past, of its

triumphs and its tragedies, but most especially of its great Civil War, is essential if any political experiment in self-government is to continue in the twenty-first century.

At such places as Shiloh, Antietam, and Gettysburg, a Union dedicated to timeless principles grounded in self-evident moral truths faced grave trials. That the North would emerge from the Civil War victorious was no foregone conclusion to those who prayed earnestly for the cessation of hostilities even as late as autumn 1864; that southern armies would surrender formally, that they would not disband into local terror and guerilla units and run roughshod over the South *en masse* was also not a foregone conclusion. Few governments in the history of the world have endured civil wars without also succumbing to devastating coup d'états or baser revolutionary impulses. Remarkably, given the course of operations in the eastern theater of the conflict to summer 1863, the North emerged victorious from the American Civil War. Perhaps more remarkably, the United States government and its foundational text, the United States Constitution, emerged intact and structurally unaltered. In time, and no matter how imperfectly and gradually, promises of liberty contained in the United States Constitution were extended through formal amendments in the period of Reconstruction to African American freed persons who sought an improved condition in society and before the law. Even in the twenty-first century, the Fourteenth Amendment is a stone of stumbling to those who would restrict legal and civil privileges to any class of persons. Indeed, the very language of the Fourteenth Amendment provided an historical and intellectual framework for Justice Anthony Kennedy's SCOTUS majority opinion as recently as *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015).

Yet political and social changes accelerated in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by American progressivism required a blood sacrifice of astonishing proportions in the American Civil War, and it was the courage, constancy, and devotion of citizen soldiers and military professionals, all of whom made fateful decisions on battlefields throughout the United States and at Gettysburg, who helped to bring about the necessary conditions for social change. The “new birth of freedom” of which Lincoln spoke at Gettysburg in November of 1863 rings antiquated to those who feel no uncertainty or anxiety about the outcome of the American Civil War in the historical present, but for those engaged in the great struggle (and as Lincoln articulated in his Second Inaugural Address, sounding a note of caution), “the progress of [American] arms” was the prospect upon which all other prospects – the “new birth” – rested.⁴ Popular biographer Richard Brookhiser has observed that “the state begins in violence.”⁵ Similarly, and as Lincoln understood, the nation was reborn at Gettysburg in violence.⁶ Study the political forces of history, yes. But historians popular and academic must not neglect accounts of military history. Battles have consequences.

⁴ Lincoln stated, famously, “The progress of our arms, upon which all else chiefly depends, is as well known to the public as myself; and it is, I trust, reasonably satisfactory and encouraging to all. With high hope for the future, no prediction in regard to it is ventured.” Lincoln, *Second Inaugural Address*, 792.

⁵ Richard Brookhiser, *Founding Father: Rediscovering George Washington* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 17.

⁶ Lincoln, *Gettysburg Address*, 734

And so I thank Dennis, even as I am grateful for his generous financial support, for his service to the historical profession, and for how he has helped to communicate the enduring significance of the American Civil War and its battlefield sites to a junior scholar in the field. If Americans of the twenty-first century cannot safeguard and pass on histories of their Civil War in its strategic, operational, and tactical dimensions to future generations, they risk losing a deeper knowledge of the American experience essential to their noblest cultural and political inheritance.

Thanks are also due to Ms. Jennifer Alarcon, who graciously arranged seminar logistics, and who coordinated all of my travel and lodging for the seminar. From first to last, she made certain that my experience with the seminar was a positive one, and Jennifer merits praise for managing – and with tremendous skill – every detail of the seminar itinerary. I wish also to thank Dr. James Broomall, director of the George Tyler Moore Center of the Study of the Civil War, for welcoming me to the seminar and for allowing me the flexibility to participate in the seminar as a fellow learner. Though I have published peer-reviewed academic articles on the subject of Reynolds and the Battle of Gettysburg, it was refreshing to learn at the seminar from fellow conference participants; to stand, often in silence, in the chilled, autumnal Pennsylvania air, surveying the battlefield, acquiring a sense of place, and listen as others offered key insights on battlefield tours. Finally, I thank my fellow participants in the seminar – the George Tyler Moore Center faithful – who welcomed me into their ranks and expressed sincere interest in my work. Many of these individuals have been reading about the American Civil War for longer than I have been alive, and their knowledge of the

subject, and their passion for American history generally, was inspiring and occasionally intimidating. At dinner at the Inn at Herr Ridge, and beyond the expected Civil War discussions, table conversation ebbed and flowed from such subjects as old college football rivalries in the Midwest to cultural and institutional challenges to higher education in the twenty-first century, and even to the cultural history of eighteenth-century New York. Fellow seminar participants were pleasant companions on our battlefield tours. In sum, the George Tyler Moore Center seminar faithful were kind to me and made me feel very much at home. I thank them.

The seminar program and points of resonance with my research on the subject of General Reynolds at the Battle of Gettysburg

From the first, seminar sessions complemented and challenged how I approach my dissertation, which examines the life, command, and memory of General John F. Reynolds. Dr. James Broomall's fine lecture, "By Whose Hand? The Curious Letters of a Civil War Soldier," communicated how for those soldiers who endured it, the American Civil War was a traumatic experience. His lecture, which revealed the emotional and psychological interiority of Civil War soldiers attempting to make sense of the war's horrors through antebellum and gendered structures of honor and letter writing, builds on the work of such scholars as Drew Gilpin Faust, Mark Schantz, and Nicholas Marshall (and others). These scholars, whose work I also engage, have written extensively and with great insight on how the unprecedented nature of Civil War deaths fractured genteel Christian and Victorian norms that together constituted "the

Good Death.” I have written in the pages of [*American Nineteenth Century History*](#) how loved ones of General Reynolds experienced similar struggles when his body was returned from the battle front at Gettysburg, and I was pleased that my own research bore immediate and direct relevance to the seminar’s inaugural lecture.

In his informative tours of the battlefield at Oak Ridge and along the northern edge of McPherson’s Ridge, sites of significant action on the battle’s first day, Kevin Pawlak ably demonstrated that historians must work carefully to reconstruct memories of a battle that are often contradictory. On a field covered in smoke from rifle musket, small arms, and artillery fire, soldiers often lacked the proper vantage point from which to ascertain with any certainty the unfolding of battlefield events. Furthermore, and as Allen Carl Guelzo has noted in his history of the Gettysburg Campaign, Civil War soldiers fought battles in a world that did not move to the steady and inexorable rhythm of synchronized time.⁷ Thus, the very temporality of events was not firm even for the people who experienced the fighting in the fog of war at Gettysburg; this sense of temporality grew hazier, no doubt, with the passing of time, and historians whose domain is historical memory must exercise considerable skill and caution when weighing post-war reminiscences of Civil War veterans concerning the course, temporality, sequence, and outcome of battles against the historical record.

In places, of course, the historical record presents something of a challenge to reconstruct. Pawlak demonstrated this convincingly in his retelling of controversies

⁷ Allen C. Guelzo, *Gettysburg: The Last Invasion* (New York: Knopf, 2013), xii.

surrounding the opening shots of the battle. Who fired first? Did the battle's opening rounds discharge from the muzzles of the 56th Pennsylvania's rifles? Or, were the first Federal infantry to fire those of the 2nd Wisconsin? Written, post-war debates among infantry veterans naturally overlooked the claims of Federal cavalry and artillery who also claimed to fire the monumental battle's opening rounds.

In a similar vein, I have written in the pages of the [*Gettysburg Magazine*](#) that controversies emanate from stories concerning the arrival of General Reynolds on the battlefield at Gettysburg on the morning of July 1st, 1863, and from his death that followed shortly thereafter. In particular, I suggest that the arrival of Reynolds on the battlefield at Gettysburg has received highly romanticized depiction in literature and film. Curiously, no conclusive evidence exists to support the battle reminiscence of Lt. Aaron Brainard Jerome, an officer in the Signal Corps attached to Buford's cavalry division, which established the meeting of Generals Reynolds and Buford at the cupola of the Lutheran Seminary. It seems more likely that Reynolds first met Buford closer to the battlefield on McPherson's Ridge, west of the Lutheran Seminary. If one visits the Lutheran Seminary Ridge Museum, however – as seminar participants did on the morning of 12 October 2018 – one sees the commemoration of the Jerome story.

What is more, early battle narratives held that Reynolds fell the victim of a Confederate sharpshooter, a highly-trained marksman skilled with the rifle musket. Sharpshooters in the Civil War combat often functioned more as skirmishers – the term “sniper” had not yet entered the professional military lexicon, and they did not feature prominently in the Battle of Gettysburg. Additionally, sources more contemporaneous

to the Battle of Gettysburg did not seem to believe that Reynolds fell the victim of a marksman's shot. All of this points to the romanticizing of Reynolds in Gettysburg and Civil War memory, a process that persists to the present day. And while the true historical record is difficult – and perhaps impossible – to know with certainty, one fact that emerges with clarity is that memories of consequential events in the Civil War such as those described above were, and remain, contested – contested both by battle participants and by the scholars who routinely write about them.

To conclude, I wish to narrate what was, for me, the highlight of the seminar, something that has helped me to think more deeply about the American Civil War since returning from Gettysburg in October. Though I valued so many seminar experiences from October 11th to October 14th – Wayne Motts's fascinating talks on the material culture of the battle (which even featured the exhibition of a battle flag sewn by Tiffany and Co. that marked the flank of the 104th New York Regiment on Oak Ridge on 1 July 1863) on Sunday morning were one such high point – it was a seemingly ordinary afternoon excursion that, for me, left the firmest impression.

On Friday, the George Tyler Moore Center seminar traveled to the farm of Dean and Judy Schulz in sunlight and in crisp autumnal air. As seminar participants walked the wooded and fenced ground that Dean and Judy have worked so diligently and faithfully to preserve – pristine ground that makes one see and even feel how the battlefield appeared in July 1863 – I was reminded, strangely, of Robert Penn Warren, of whom I have written in the pages of *Civil War History*, and curiously, of the poet Robert

Frost.⁸ David Blight, pre-eminent among Civil War memory scholars, has written that as a boy Robert Penn Warren was captivated by stories of the war.⁹ Warren's grandfather, Gabriel Thomas Penn, passed down much of his Civil War experience to the future poet laureate through stories and song. Dean struck me immediately as something of a legend – possessed of humor and wit, and in firm command of a boundless local knowledge of the Battle of Gettysburg, he seemed almost a manifestation of the rural and agrarian sensibilities of Frost and of the historic and literary sensibilities of Warren. As Dean regaled seminar participants with stories of the farm, of the battle, and of his childhood association with Civil War veterans who would return to the farm and tell him stories of the war, and as the scent of his pipe tobacco drifted over the fields, I was reminded that no matter what one reads about a battle, one must see where men fought and died, as they had on Dean's farm.

History is rooted in place. And while historians can write about events, they often struggle to capture, with emotional clarity and with true spirit, the essence of those events. To engage more deeply with the past historians need stories. Stories speak to the very core of our being. Stories, combined with a sense of place, make real for persons in the historical present what historians cannot recapture and put into the books. This, I think, is what Lincoln meant, if only in some sense, when he reminded his

⁸ Mitchell G. Klingenberg, "Robert Penn Warren, Wendell Berry, and the Dark Side of Civil War History," *Civil War History* 64 no. 2 (June 2018): 175-208.

⁹ David Blight, *American Oracle: The Civil War in the Civil Rights Era* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 31-32.

listeners at Gettysburg that the memory and meaning of northern sacrifice in the war for the Union was “for us the living ...” I thank Dean and Judy for allowing me to participate, if only in a small way, in the living story that is the Battle of Gettysburg.

To Mr. Dennis Frye and the leadership of the George Tyler Moore Center for the Study of the Civil War, to fellow seminar participants, thank you.

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