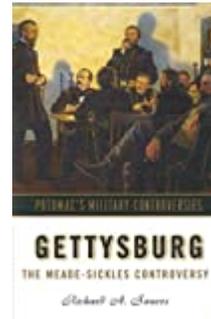




Richard A. Sauers. *Gettysburg: The Meade-Sickles Controversy.* Washington, D. C.: Brassey's, 2003. xii + 207 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57488-488-3.



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Published on H-CivWar (November, 2003)

“Fresh Interest” to an Old Debate

“About 3 p.m. I rode out to the extreme left ... when I found that Major-General Sickles, commanding Third Corps, not fully apprehending ... instructions ... had advanced ... his corps some half a mile or three-quarters of a mile in front of the line ... on ... which it designed his corps should rest. Having found Major-General Sickles, I was explaining to him that he was too far in advance ... when the enemy opened upon him with several batteries ... and immediately ... made a most vigorous assault.” Major General George Meade, official report, October 1, 1863.

“It was not through any misinterpretation of orders. It was either a good line or a bad one, and, whichever it was, I took it on my own responsibility.” Major General Daniel Sickles, testimony before the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, February 26, 1864.

The Battle of Gettysburg, the largest and bloodiest engagement in the western hemisphere, has produced seemingly endless fascination and debate in the 140 years since it was fought. Proof of this fact is the immense amount of literature produced concerning this landmark engagement. Hundreds of books, along with thousands

of other accounts (such as newspaper and magazine articles, journals, diaries and letters) seemingly describe and scrutinize every aspect and phase of the battle.

Many of these works center on the numerous controversies associated with the battle. The most famous of these is the subject of a new book by Richard Sauers, *Gettysburg: The Meade-Sickles Controversy*. Although its origins date back to the second day of the pivotal battle (July 2, 1863) this affair, over many decades, eventually grew in scope to include many peripheral issues, accusations, counter-accusations and outright falsehoods. It also involved two men who were nearly complete opposites.

Major General George Gordon Meade, who led the Army of the Potomac to its most famous victory at Gettysburg, was a professional soldier who was deliberate, thorough, at times hot-tempered, and possessed an unshakeable resolve. Considered by many of his contemporaries to be a solid leader, Meade was unpretentious and always put the needs of his country before his own. Major General Daniel Sickles was a professional politician, being a Tammany Hall Democratic New York Congress-

man before the war. He was also one of the most flamboyant and infamous personalities of the mid-nineteenth century. Sickles's 1859 murder of his wife's lover, and subsequent acquittal due to temporary insanity, was only one of many scandals that marked his sordid political career. Using his varied and powerful connections, Sickles was able to gain a commission as a brigadier general shortly after the war's outbreak. On June 28, 1863, Meade was appointed commander of the Army of the Potomac while Sickles had risen to command of that army's Third Corps. Being so diametrically opposed, it was only a matter of time before these two men clashed.

That clash came on July 2, 1863 and ignited the long and bitter controversy that followed. During the early morning hours, as Meade was overseeing the concentration of his scattered forces south of Gettysburg, he assigned Sickles's Third Corps to hold the army's left flank, including Little Round Top. Sickles expressed reservations concerning the terrain he was to occupy and other problems associated with defending this line. Throughout that morning and early afternoon Sickles attempted to get permission to take up a new line along the Emmitsburg Road up to three-quarters of a mile to his front. By early afternoon Sickles, growing steadily anxious, finally ordered his entire corps to advance. By taking up this new line his troops occupied landmarks made famous by the fighting that followed, including Devil's Den, the Wheatfield, and Peach Orchard. Just as importantly, Sickles's order would leave Little Round Top undefended. The fighting that followed was destined to become some of the most famous in American history.

Sauers's original goal was to present the entire episode in a non-biased style, letting the reader make his/her own decision as to whether Meade or Sickles was correct. Sauers readily admits, however, that by the time he finished, his attitude was "very biased in favor of General Meade's point of view" (p. xi). Even still, the presentation of the material is both comprehensive and systematic, thus giving both points of view equal treatment. The book is organized into a preface and ten chapters, the first four of which provide a background of the Gettysburg Campaign and the second day of the battle, along with an explanation of the developing controversy through the postwar years. The last five chapters cover each of the four main points that Sickles later used to defend his decision, along with a conclusion.

The four points of Sickles's defense center around the Confederate movements against the left flank of the Union line, the orders he was given by Meade, the weak

position the Third Corps was assigned along Cemetery Ridge and Meade's supposed desire to retreat from Gettysburg. Sauers proves conclusively that Sickles elaborated or even completely distorted the facts in each of the points in order to defend his controversial forward movement. Sickles's only solid point was the argument concerning the weak position assigned to his corps. Under detailed analysis, such as that provided by Sauers, even this defense becomes less credible.

The pivotal chapter in the book is the fifth, "The Controversy within the Context of Gettysburg Historiography." It is here that Sauers places the controversy within the context of the postwar memory of Gettysburg. He states the reasoning for this approach in his preface, explaining, "many twentieth-century historians have ... allowed the veracity of unreliable sources to go without challenge ... [and have] relied too heavily upon published works written in the period of 1863 to about 1920" (p. ix). Many of these works, Sauers points out were filled with problems, such as not acknowledging their sources and containing "flagrant errors" or "falsehoods" (p. ix). This is especially true, he believes, of those accounts written by participants with an obvious bias to champion one of the opposing sides of the controversy. Some of these works "combined truths, half-truths, and lies" (p. x) to strengthen their arguments and thus should be used with great care. By surveying and scrutinizing these works, Sauers provides the reader with an excellent overview of the controversy and its postwar developments before he analyzes each of Sickles's main points of defense.

The narrative is, for the most part, accurate and it is obvious that the author did very solid research. The notes and bibliography are long and extensive, containing a wealth of primary sources. Sauers's writing style is fairly easy to read and comprehend. Six excellent maps and seven photographs, of the most important personalities associated with the event, accompany the narrative. The book is actually based on Sauers's master's thesis, which was later refined and published as *A Caspian Sea of Ink: The Meade-Sickles Controversy* in 1989. This final version has been updated and improved, including the addition of new sources and studies that are more recent.

There are some minor problems with the book, though certainly not enough to dissuade a potential reader. Sauers's work presupposes that the reader already possesses some knowledge of the battle. For those who only have a basic understanding of Gettysburg or are looking for a more detailed discussion of the actual combat, other works will better serve their needs. Also,

while Sauers's text is extremely thorough, in places it reads like a master's thesis, being somewhat repetitive and dry. This is not surprising, considering the origin of the work, and only slightly detracts from the overall effort.

As a whole, this work provides the most comprehensive, reliable and analytical study of the most famous con-

troversy associated with Gettysburg. This subject is still the topic of heated debate, even after the passage of over 140 years. In doing so, Sauers probably comes closest to the ultimate truth when he writes, "I have written what may well prove to be a controversial book that Sickles's supporters will disdain. If so, I have succeeded in renewing fresh interest in an old controversy" (p. xi).

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Citation: Eric Campbell. Review of Sauers, Richard A., *Gettysburg: The Meade-Sickles Controversy*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. November, 2003.

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