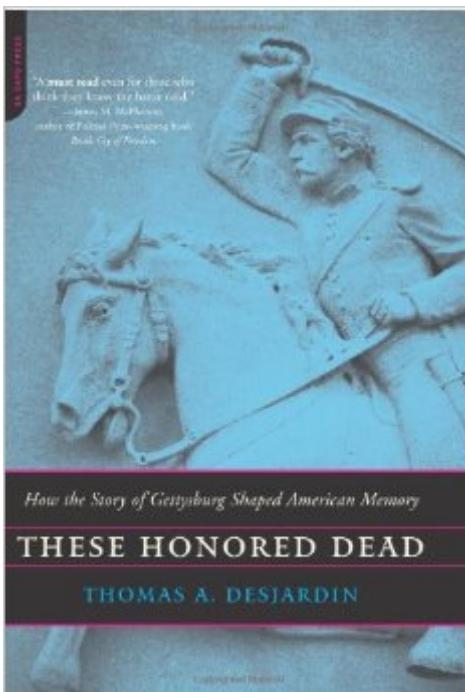


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These Honored Dead: How The Story Of Gettysburg Shaped American Memory



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

If you type "Gettysburg" into this site's search engine, you'll find more than 500 books that include the name of that famous battle in their title. It's likely that more has been written about those three days at the beginning of July, 1863, than any other battle in the history of the United States. Yet in "These Honored Dead" Thomas A. Desjardin brings fresh insights to the Gettysburg saga by beginning his account on July 4, 1863--the day after the guns fell silent. In this thoughtful work, Desjardin explores the legends and myths that have developed around Gettysburg in the ensuing decades. He argues that the actual record of what happened has been open to conflicting interpretation by just about any group or individual with enough persuasive ability to bend the story

to its own purposes "History has a way of coming out as we hoped it would rather than the way things really happened," he observes, then spends the next several chapters exploring how the reality of the conflict has been obscured, through accidental or deliberate misinterpretation. In the first decades after the battle, it might have been a disgraced officer seeking to salvage his reputation; in more recent times, it's likely to have been a novelist or filmmaker in search of a dramatic hero or moment to illuminate his story. But whatever the motives, the result has been to shroud the reality of those days in myth. In one chapter, Desjardin considers the conflicting versions on what happened on Little Round Top. Certainly it's a pivotal spot on the battlefield; but if we can't determine the truth of what happened on a piece of real estate barely 100 yards wide, how can we hope to sort out the myths from the reality of the battle as a whole?

Thomas A. Desjardin's *These Honored Dead* is a decent introduction to some of the popular myths that have spawned and lingered from Gettysburg since the battle occurred. The popularized version of Gettysburg from Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels* (1974), Ted Turner's *Gettysburg* (1993), and Ken Burn's *The Civil War* (1990) have ensured that millions of visitors come to the battlefield each year, but Desjardin argues that the majority of these visitors are seeking a distorted, incomplete, and exaggerated story. With a PhD in history and years of experience providing tours at Gettysburg, he has the credentials to address these myths. Desjardin is not afraid to slaughter any sacred cows. He does not just question the importance of Little Round Top (it was not), whether Chamberlain actually ordered the famous bayonet charge (he did not), or whether the Confederates aimed for the "copse of trees" during their final assault (they aimed for Cemetery Hill), but Desjardin questions the overall importance of the battle in the scope of the war. Civil War buffs may find these topics to be outdated trivia, but the author provides insight into how modern-day historians and entertainers simply built on the myths that the contemporary historians and even participants initiated. Desjardin sees it as human nature to want to be part of an important experience and as a result, participants tended to inflate or perpetuate myths so as not to be left out of the post-battle glory. The book provides a decent chapter on the Meade-Sickles controversy that helped shape many of the early beliefs of the war that still exist today.

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