

VOLUME XXV, NUMBER 2, SPRING 2025

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REVIEW OF BOOKS

A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship

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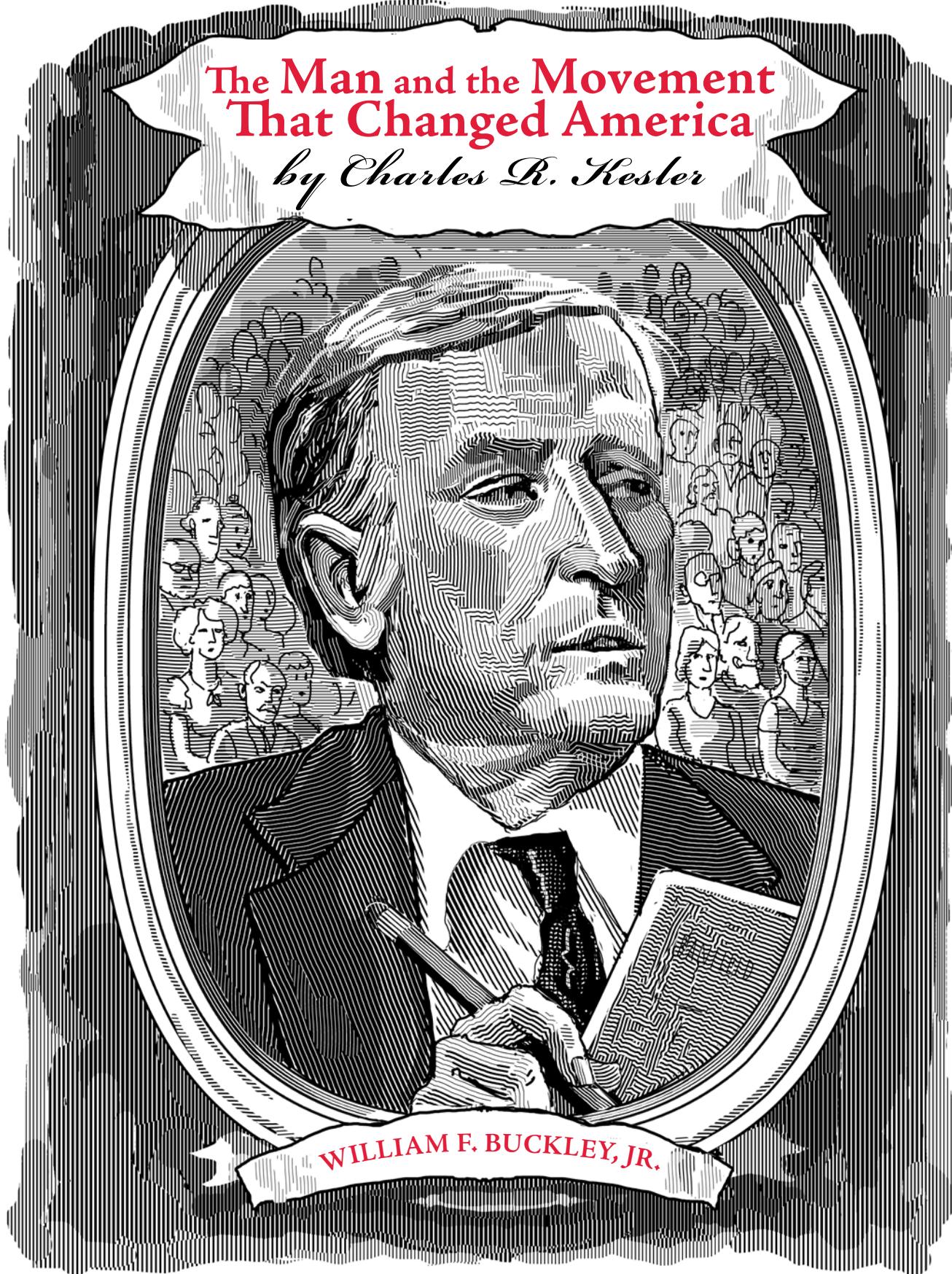
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Book Review by Michael Burlingame

THE WATERLOO OF THE REBELLION

Voices from Gettysburg: Letters, Papers, and Memoirs from the Greatest Battle of the Civil War,
by Allen C. Guelzo. Citadel Press, 400 pages, \$29



FOR HIS ANTHOLOGY *VOICES FROM GETTYSBURG: Letters, Papers, and Memoirs from the Greatest Battle of the Civil War*, Allen Guelzo has assembled some of the choicest items from the myriad original sources he consulted for his highly readable, deeply researched, prize-winning campaign history, *Gettysburg: The Last Invasion* (2013). His new book provides dozens of you-are-there eyewitness accounts by generals and privates, Yankees and Confederates, men and women, soldiers and civilians, some written in letters and diaries of the time, many composed from memory years later—not only of the three-day battle itself but also of the preliminary military developments, the commanders, the retreat, and the aftermath, including Abraham Lincoln’s 272-word address.

A self-described “Civil War person” since boyhood, Guelzo is ideally qualified for assembling such an anthology, having emerged as the leading contemporary scholar of the Civil War and of Lincoln, rivaled only by

James M. McPherson. Currently serving as the Thomas W. Smith Distinguished Research Scholar and director of the Initiative on Politics and Statesmanship in the James Madison Program at Princeton, Guelzo previously directed the Civil War Era Studies program at Gettysburg College.

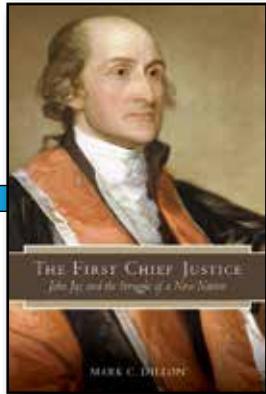
IN *VOICES FROM GETTYSBURG*, HE DELIBERATELY excludes much that readers can easily find online in such multivolume sources as *The Bachelder Papers: Gettysburg in Their Own Words*, a collection of 19th-century correspondence between historian John B. Bachelder and Gettysburg veterans, and *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, published by the U.S. War Department at the turn of the 20th century.

Guelzo freely acknowledges that using reminiscent material is controversial, for memories can be imperfect. Remarking on that frailty, Calvin Coolidge described people

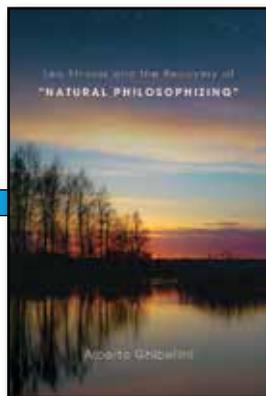
in his hometown who “remember some of the most interesting things that never happened.” Similarly, Mark Twain quipped: “When I was younger, I could remember anything, whether it had happened or not; but my faculties are decaying now and soon I shall be so I cannot remember any but the things that never happened.” More seriously, the preeminent Lincoln scholar of the first half of the 20th century, James G. Randall, observed that the “vagueness of reminiscence given after many years is familiar to all careful historical students: if, in the haste of general reading, this matter is disregarded, the essence of the subject is overlooked.”

In response to Randall’s admonitions, historian Douglas L. Wilson has cogently argued that scholars cannot dismiss reminiscences simply because they would not pass muster in a law court: “Observing the evidentiary safeguards of a criminal trial would, after all, bring a substantial portion of historical inquiry to a halt, for much of

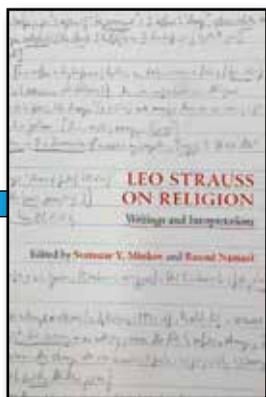
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what we want to know about the past simply cannot be established on these terms." Former president of the Oral History Association Donald Ritchie offered sound advice for scholars using reminiscent material: "Treat oral evidence as cautiously as any other form of evidence. Documents written at the time have an immediacy about them and are not influenced by subsequent events, and yet those documents can be incomplete, in error, or written to mislead." For Ritchie, a "statement is not necessarily truer if written down at the time than if recalled later in testimony."

Guelzo notes that "soldiers in combat can rarely afford to pay much attention to anything beyond what happens a few yards around them." He further acknowledges that "there are more than a few so-called memoir writers...whose colorful recollections of Gettysburg were, in fact, frauds." And yet "reminiscent materials...cannot be totally dismissed, either." Many things "experienced in the great battle were seared into memories that endured the passage of time" and "even the writing of them years later may have been based on letters and diary entries from the battle itself."

THE BOOK'S CONTEMPORARY FIRST-HAND accounts from diaries and letters, along with the more numerous reminiscences, provide many arresting moments, vivid images, and thoughtful reflections on the battle. Some examples:

Sorrow expressed by soldiers whose comrades were killed on the first day:

When the roll was called, many a brave boy for the first time failed to respond to his name. The answers made by the living for their dead or wounded comrades were pathetic. As the names of the missing would be called, such answers as these would be returned:

"John was killed before we fired a shot."

"I saw Frank throw up his arms and fall just after we fired the first volley."

"Jim was shot through the head."

"Charley was killed while we were charging across the plain this side of the brick house."

"I saw Joe lying on the ground, his face covered with blood, but he was not dead."

"George was killed by a piece of shell, while we were firing."

"Ed is lying dead some distance this side of the Emmitsburg road."

Strong men sobbed.

Hardships endured by soldiers:

[Lice] would insidiously invade men's clothing, and as they multiply rapidly and as thick as grass seed, soldiers' garments became a medium for mass conventions of livestock of a maddening, aggravated character.

The plight of Pennsylvania blacks as General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia approached:

The negroes darkened the different roads northward for hours, loaded with household effects, sable babies, etc., and horses and wagons and cattle crowded every avenue to places of safety.

Quite a number of negroes, free and slave—men, women and children—were captured by [Confederate raiders under the command of General Albert] Jenkins and started South to be sold into bondage.... Some of the men were bound with ropes, and the children were mounted in front or behind the rebels on their horses.

The guerilla band came to town on a regular slave-hunt, which presented the worst spectacle I ever saw in this war. They proclaimed, first, that they would burn down every house which harbored a fugitive slave, and did not deliver him up within twenty minutes. And then commenced the search upon all the houses on which suspicion rested. They succeeded in capturing several contrabands [i.e., blacks], among them a woman with two little children.

Plundering and looting justified by Confederates:

General John Imboden told a Gettysburg resident "that if he had the power, he would burn down every town and lay waste every farm in Pennsylvania." He explained: "You have only a little taste of what you have done to our people in the South. Your army destroyed all the fences, burnt towns, turned poor women out of house and home, broke pianos, furniture, old family pictures, and committed every act of vandalism. I thank God that the hour has come when this war will be fought out on Pennsylvania soil."

Poignant death scenes:



Col. Joshua Chamberlain of Maine, the hero of the crucial struggle for Little Round Top on the battle's second day, succored a mortally wounded private: "I bent down over him. His face lightened; his lips moved. But I spoke first, 'My dear boy, it has gone hard with you. You shall be cared for!' He whispered, 'Tell my mother I did not die a coward!' It was the prayer of homebred manhood poured out with his lifeblood. I knew, and answered him, 'You die a sergeant. I promote you for faithful service and noble courage on the field of Gettysburg!' That was all he wanted."

Gruesome images:

Nothing more terrific than this storm of artillery can be imagined. The missiles of both armies passed over our heads. The roar of the guns was deafening, the air was soon clouded with smoke, and the shriek and startling crack of exploding shell above, around and in our midst; the blowing up of our caissons in our rear; the driving through the air of fence-rails, posts, and limbs of trees; the groans of dying men, the neighing

of frantic and wounded horses, created a scene of absolute horror.

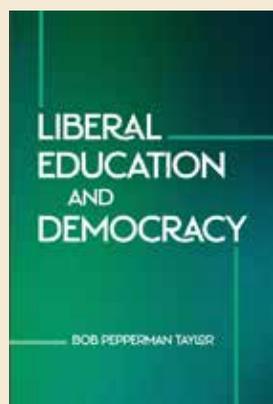
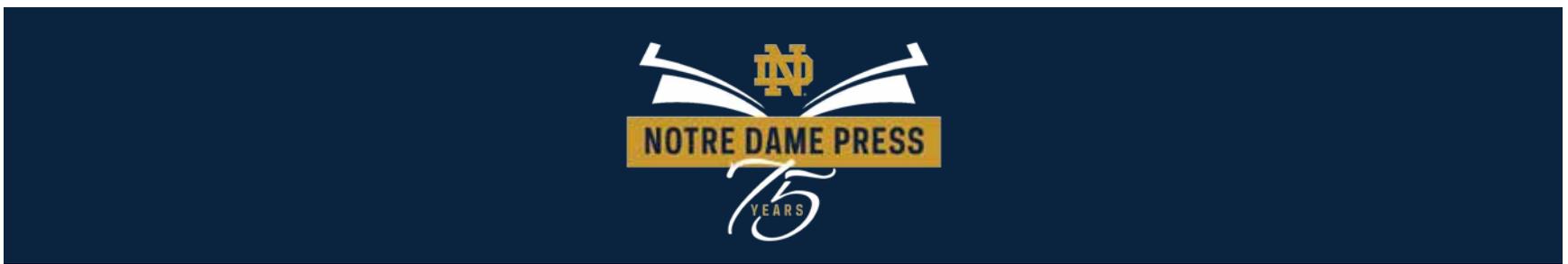
The climactic scene on the third and final day as Confederate forces briefly penetrated the Union Army's center:

General [Lewis] Armistead, with hat on sword, leaps the fence followed by six color bearers with their flags and about one hundred and fifty to two hundred men. At this juncture, [Union] General [Alexander] Webb calls on his reserves and leads them forward in person to close the gap in the line through which Armistead and his followers are pouring. Glorious leader! His handsome, manly form towers for a moment a central figure between the two lines, as with sword in one hand and hat in the other his order of "forward to the wall!" rang out cheerily and strong above the noise of battle. If he should fall, Gettysburg is lost. Wounded, he still keeps his feet. His indomitable spirit is communicated to and inspires the men of the Seventy-second and One Hundred and Sixth [regiments]. They sweep forward to the fence over

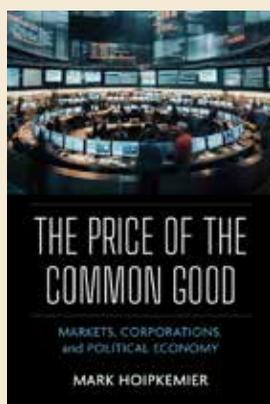
Armistead's prostrate body—treading underfoot the rebel standards, whose bearers have fallen beside their leader—the thousands who have reached the fence throw down their arms, and Gettysburg is won!

Sprinkled throughout the book are many illustrations from *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, a series published in the late 19th century, though there are too few maps included. Readers would also have benefited from headnotes describing the authors of the accounts. But these are minor quibbles. *Voices from Gettysburg* provides a richly variegated chorus, compact enough to be used by tourists eager to hear from participants in that battle and scholarly enough to enrich the understanding of those reading histories of the fateful campaign, which a Union cavalryman aptly described as "the Waterloo of the Rebellion."

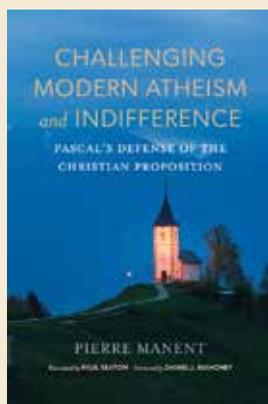
Michael Burlingame is the Naomi B. Lynn Distinguished Chair in Lincoln Studies at the University of Illinois Springfield and the author, most recently, of The Black Man's President: Abraham Lincoln, African Americans, and the Pursuit of Racial Equality (Pegasus Books).



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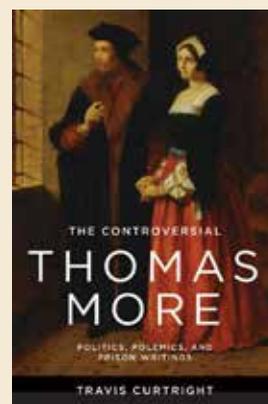
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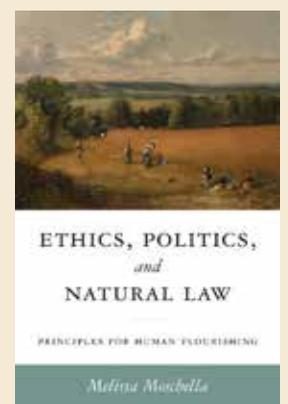
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