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| http://www.phibetaiota.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/cover-cain.jpg | [**Review: Cain at Gettysburg – Ralph Peters at his best**](http://www.phibetaiota.net/2012/02/review-cain-at-gettysburg-ralph-peters-at-his-best/)Categories: [5 Star](http://www.phibetaiota.net/category/reviews/bookrating/five/),[Biography & Memoirs](http://www.phibetaiota.net/category/reviews/biography/),[Culture, Research](http://www.phibetaiota.net/category/reviews/cultureresearch/),[Fiction](http://www.phibetaiota.net/category/reviews/fiction/),[History](http://www.phibetaiota.net/category/reviews/history/),[Leadership](http://www.phibetaiota.net/category/reviews/leadership/),[War & Face of Battle](http://www.phibetaiota.net/category/reviews/war/)Tags: [Peters](http://www.phibetaiota.net/tag/peters/)Ralph Peters5.0 out of 5 stars **Spectacular Blend of Rigorous & Populist History**,February 24, 2012 |
| Amazon Page |  |

I have read [The Killer Angels: A Novel of the Civil War (Modern Library)](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0679643249/ref%3Dcm_cr_asin_lnk), which the author himself acknowledges as one of the best books about Gettysburg – but also one that bought into the prevalent myths. This book is the equal of Killer Angels in its atmospheric electricity, certainly the equal if not more moving with respect to “aha” professional insights and “feeling in the fingertips” gut-wrenchers (I counted six goose-bump moments reading Cain, I recall only one in reading Killer Angels), and vastly more important than Killer Angels in the grand scheme of things because this author and this book have restored the reputation of General George Meade at his finest hour – given the Army THREE DAYS before Gettysburg, and leading that Army to the single most important victory of the Civil War, however one may view that war while also instantly assessing and correcting the mistakes of his predecessor, the most important being a scattered leaderless army.

This is a book written by a professional military officer who is also a historian, a brilliant and often poetic author of both non-fiction and historical fiction better than dry academic texts, and an adventurer who knows the world from gutter to grand salons.

The book concludes with a very clear explanation of how General Meade’s reputation was ruined by a scheming General Sickles, and how some of the main characters fared after the war of secession. More to the point, this is the definitive book that rescues the reputation of General Meade. While there are many other books, one in particular being [Meade: Victor of Gettysburg (Military Profiles)](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1574887491/ref%3Dcm_cr_asin_lnk), no other book can match the eloquence, authenticity, and level of detail of this ultra-historical and poetic work of redemption.

Here are some of the professional highlights that I noted down – I do not report the goose bump moments–for those, buy the book.

01 General Lee knew he wanted great ground, his subordinates did not deliver. The entire battle was lost twice – the first time when Lee’s advance unit wavered and withdrew while Meade’s did not, the first overly concerned with orders not to engage, the second brilliantly conscious of the importance of terrain if the armies were to battle in that time and place.

02 In the second instance, General Lee lost this battle and destroyed his Army by dismissing General Longstreet’s explicit and persistent objections (urging that they withdraw and strive to find better ground between Washington and the well-entrenched Union forces). On the basis of this book, my past view that General Stuart’s absence with his cavalry hurt General Lee badly drops to insignificant – what really hurt General Lee was his own hubris, pride, and false belief that he could be prevail because of who he was and what his Army represented.

03 On balance, General Meade’s subordinate commanders were better than General Lee’s, and this brings up a point that becomes more and more glaring as the battle / book go on: the best armies really do prepare subordinate leaders to move up two levels as needed – company commander in the morning, battalion commander by nightfall. How well those subordinates were trained to rise to the occasion matters.

04 Individuals, personalities, grudges, all of this matters. Not having been a general myself, I have to take the message from the book, that when positioning units and when deciding courses of action, the personality of the commander – the faith in that commander’s ability to hear, ingest, and execute a specific order – is far more important than the nature of the unit itself, but the unit of course being the embodiment of the commander.

05 Time in a battle is magnificently communicated in this book, where an entire unit might be sacrificed to buy no more than one hour, that hour being sufficient to bring up the reserve artillery or a much needed infantry division.

06 Patience in the heat of battle jumps out in this book on a couple of occasions. Whether it was the author’s intent or not, this book is certainly worthy of being used at Command & Staff College as well as the War College, along with a few others that come to mind, such as General Zinni’s [Battle Ready (Commander Series)](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B001QWFYFM/ref%3Dcm_cr_asin_lnk), [We Were Soldiers Once…and Young: Ia Drang – the Battle That Changed the War in Vietnam](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/034547581X/ref%3Dcm_cr_asin_lnk), General Dalliere’s [Shake Hands with the Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0786715103/ref%3Dcm_cr_asin_lnk), and my personal intelligence favorite, [Who the Hell Are We Fighting?: The Story of Sam Adams and the Vietnam Intelligence Wars](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1586421042/ref%3Dcm_cr_asin_lnk).

07 The author, himself an intelligence professional as am I, does not over-play the role of intelligence (I recommend [Grant’s Secret Service: The Intelligence War from Belmont to Appomattox](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0803269110/ref%3Dcm_cr_asin_lnk), but does mention throughout the book the various roles of cavalry, maps all too scarce and lacking in detail, and the role that time and the CONSCIOUSNESS of time played in the minds of each combat leader–I also noted the role of artillery smoke in completely obscuring the battlefield, after the opening barrages on both sides, both sides were fighting “blind.”

As pre-reviewers have noted, the book is packed with detail, from an authentic depiction of the number of foreigners recently arrived who fight in their own language, to the heat and troops marching in their underwear, to blood-greased bark, the full scent of a man, ghosts filling the ranks, and death in detail.

The author himself recommends a number of books in his short epilogue, among them [Covered with Glory: The 26th North Carolina Infantry at the Battle of Gettysburg](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0807871400/ref%3Dcm_cr_asin_lnk), [The Sigel Regiment: A History Of The 26th Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry, 1862-1865](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1882810201/ref%3Dcm_cr_asin_lnk), and [For Liberty and Justice: A Biography of Brigadier General Wlodzimierz B. Krzyzanowski, 1824-1887](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0966036395/ref%3Dcm_cr_asin_lnk).

This is a great book, and for those not familiar with the author’s many non-fiction works, as well as his Owen Perry series on the Civil War, I can only say that great as this book is, do not stop here – pick from among the author’s many past works (see my summary reviews of perhaps half of them), and indulge in the writings of the only true warrior-poet that I know.

Meade beat Lee on three days notice. History on this point and up to this point has been wrong. If nothing else, let this one book cast doubts on all history and encourage a more penetrating integrationist approach to learning by each reader. Lee beat himself. That is the deeper lesson.



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