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Firestorm At Gettysburg: Civilian Voices June–November 1863



Synopsis

In this book, the civilians who lived through the battle of Gettysburg recount this pivotal event in the American Civil War in their own words. The eyewitness accounts, spanning from June 15, 1863, through Lincoln's address in November of that year to the

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Customer Reviews

"Firestorm at Gettysburg" provided an often fascinating account of the Battle of Gettysburg from the point of view of some of the town's residents. Usually, most accounts focus on the famous events such as the battle on Little Round Top or Pickett's Charge, but this book focuses on the chaos created in the town itself, especially as the Union troops stampeded through town and up Cemetery Hill at the end of the first day of fighting. We read how people cowered in their cellars, watched the battle from the fields or rooftops, took in wounded friend or foe, and sometimes foolishly ventured outside. "Firestorm" also describes the battle's aftermath in horrific detail, not allowing the reader to forget the carnage that the townspeople had to deal with long after both armies had marched away. The town was overwhelmed by all of the dead and wounded left behind, and the suffering that many of the soldiers endured not only because of their wounds but also because of the conditions they were hospitalized under was truly appalling, even sickening. The book grabbed me for many reasons. Several accounts described soldiers, from both sides, behaving despicably, or nobly, or foolishly, or patiently, or stoically, or oddly, or in a variety of other ways. Accounts of conversations between townspeople and the Confederate soldiers occupying the town intrigued me. It was good to

be reminded that individuals fought this battle, not just armies. Obviously, the residents were in the dark as to the overall progress of the battle since they were primarily concerned with keeping safely out of harm's way. The authors wisely inserted summaries of the battle periodically so the reader could compare the impressions of the residents to the actual progression of the battle. Other accounts of events that occurred in the town captivated me. A resident's narrow escape from the bullets of a sharpshooter, the capture of Union soldiers who refused to endanger the residents of a house, the selflessness many displayed as they took wounded soldiers into their homes...there were numerous little incidents which, taken together, painted a vivid picture of the confusion, fear, tragedy, and the complexity of the Battle of Gettysburg. Overall, I enjoyed the book a great deal. Unfortunately, this book is full of technical errors. Who proofread this? One of the other reviewers already listed several factual contradictions present in the book, contradictions that I too noticed and grumbled about. There were also numerous typographical and even formatting errors that would draw the wrath of any English teacher. These errors really annoyed me and dampened my enthusiasm for the book noticeably. How much? I'll put it this way. I read this book after borrowing it from a friend, trying to decide whether or not to buy it. I'll buy it in a heartbeat...AFTER the next edition, complete with factual and typographical corrections...comes out.

The subject of "Firestorm at Gettysburg" by Jim Slade and John Alexander (1998) is civilian life in the town of Gettysburg before, during, and after the great battle of July 1-3, 1863. The book describes well the impact of the battle on the local population of Gettysburg. This is an important and sometimes overlooked component of the history of the Battle of Gettysburg. In many respects, this book is good and informative. Slade and Alexander draw broadly on contemporary accounts of the effect of the Battle of Gettysburg on civilians. The book opens with a good summary "Gettysburg and Some of her Citizens" which introduces the reader to many of the residents of the town who left accounts of their experiences during the Battle. The book describes briefly the pre-Civil War history of Gettysburg, its demographics, and its economic base. Again, this is an often neglected subject and I found the treatment of it here brief but informative. The book covers the Gettysburg campaign, including Jubal Early's foray through Gettysburg one week before the Battle of Gettysburg itself commenced. It then covers each of the three days of the battle and follows- up the battle with a treatment of events in the town during the Confederate retreat and its aftermath. Its discussion of the hardships involved in burying the dead and of the efforts of the Sanitary and Christian Commissions to take care of the wounded in the months following the battle was for me the most informative part of the book. I thought the book helped me to get to know the people of Gettysburg

and to see how they interacted with the Union and Confederate military forces during the Battle. The book paints a picture of fear -- understandable given the horrors of the battle - and of the real dangers faced by the civilian populace during these tumultuous days. But there are also many scenes showing how the soldiers and the townspeople learned to cooperate with and at least try to understand one another in the difficult situation that was thrust upon both the soldiers and the civilians. There are many photographs in the book, of the battle, military leaders, civilians and of places in Gettysburg and its environs that help the reader visualize the town of Gettysburg in the 1860s and that will give the imaginative reader a feel for the town and for the impact of the Battle. The major problems with the book are the many errors of fact it contains and the many typographical errors which suggest carelessness and unreliability. Most of these factual errors and typos are individually small but, as often happens, the reader with some familiarity with Gettysburg will find them distracting. Some photographs in particular are misidentified. Many pictures of dead soldiers following the battle are identified in the book as deriving from McPherson's Ridge, the site of the fighting on July 1. In fact, recent scholarship places the sites of these photographs at Devil's Den or the Rose Farm on the opposite side of the battlefield, several miles away from McPherson's Ridge and the scenes of major fighting on July 2. This again is not a large point in itself, given the theme of the book; but it does tend to suggest a lack of familiarity in the authors with recent Gettysburg studies. It weakens the value of the book as a source rather than as a casual read. Slade and Alexander don't seem to have looked at their subject critically. The book basically consists of a patching -together of various eyewitness reports with no effort to synthesize or explain. Because of the episodic nature of the presentation, it is sometimes difficult to follow a character from one scene to the other. The book doesn't offer a good narrative flow or allow the reader to think through to any conclusions from the material presented. In summary, this book has its merits and will encourage the reader to focus on the human side of the Battle of Gettysburg rather than simply on the events of the combat. The book is good for casual reading and the many photographs will stimulate reflection. The book, unfortunately, is inadequate as a historical account. It will not serve well the reader interested in a detailed, accurate treatment of the Battle of Gettysburg and the local civilian population.

If I had read first reader's review (above) I'm sure I would have been less likely to begin reading, much less finish, this book. But for all of the inconsistencies, mistakes, and other problems, this is an entertaining, usually interesting, and often moving book presented in a contemporary, TV-like style. I suppose the multitude of (mainly) amateur historians and Civil War buffs will find the

scholarship sloppy but, frankly, there are very few Bruce Catton's and James McPherson's out there who have the rare capability of making sense out of the chaos of war while maintaining high literary and academic standards. Oh, well. The Civil War is a passion that many have staked out as their speciality, resulting in people who guard their area of "expertise" like a junkyard dog. I'm reminded of the cliché that they can't see the forest for the trees. And I believe that is the case here. Authors Slade and Alexander have (like most amateur history students) brought their love and fascination for Gettysburg and tried to see it from the vantage point of those who lived there, the average man, woman, and child. We read of the impending battle in the diaries and letters and follow events -- some humorous, some tragic, some mundane -- but all compelling -- through to the anticlimactic ending and beyond. I especially enjoyed the juxtapositioning of the photos with the text excerpts, putting faces with the voices, so to speak. So much history, especially that associated with the Civil War, is badly written, narrowly focused, trivial, grossly sentimental, and, well, the criticism could go for as long as some of those endless tomes that crowd the shelves of your neighborhood bookstore. This book deserves to be on those shelves, but, perhaps not next to Bruce Catton!

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