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Of Myths and Men

Rethinking the Legend of Little Round Top

GEORGE M. GEORGE, DANIEL R. GEORGE, ANTHONY KELLON

In his book *Myth and Meaning*, anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss wrote that all myths are driven by the need to understand the complexities and mysteries of the human condition.¹ Myths can be venerating, cautionary, didactic, or explanatory; but they always reflect and embody the cultural beliefs, attitudes, values, and worldviews of a particular people and signify their attempt to make reality comprehensible through narrative. However, so too can myths distort or replace reality and perpetuate illusions within a culture.

Since its release in 1993, the film *Gettysburg*—based on the Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Killer Angels* by Michael Shaara—has been a major force in shaping common cultural myths about the Civil War. While the film depicts several storylines, its major narrative centers on the heroism of Gen. Joshua Chamberlain (expertly played by actor Jeff Daniels), who, along with a team of ragtag soldiers from Maine, repulsed Gen. Robert E. Lee's July 2 advance on Little Round Top, thereby protecting the vulnerable Union left flank and swinging the fate of the battle and the war. The mythos generated around the events on this little rocky hill in South Central Pennsylvania and augmented by other popular works such as *The Civil War* by Ken Burns, contains several compelling narrative elements: a gentle-minded professor of rhetoric fighting and defeating the mighty marauding Army of Northern Virginia; a powerful patriotic speech Chamberlain employs to inspire his deserters to return to ranks; the almost mystical serendipity of his regiment being placed on the far left wing minutes before the

A painting of Joshua Chamberlain by Daniel R. George. Courtesy of the artist.

Confederate attack; and the intrepidity of a wounded Chamberlain and his men, who run out of ammunition yet make a bayonet charge down Little Round Top to save the day, win the battle, and thus preserve the republic. Hollywood is built on the backs of epic storylines such as this.

While the gallantry of Chamberlain's men in the Twentieth Maine and the lesser heralded heroism of Col. Patrick O'Rourke (who was killed leading

¹ Claude Levi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning: Cracking the Code of Culture* (New York: Shocken Books, 1978).

the 140th New York in a headlong charge down the western face of the plateau) are unimpeachable, recent scholarship has critiqued the inflation of the importance of the Union's victory on Little Round Top in the overall context of the Battle of Gettysburg.² Indeed, the penetrance of this mythic narrative in the popular understanding of the Civil War serves to obfuscate less romanticized figures whose actions arguably swung the outcome on the second day and ultimately the fate of the battle. In this article, we will examine what role the battle for Little Round Top played in Lee's overall plan and what actual impact its defense had in saving the Federal left wing on July 2, 1863. Additionally, we will scrutinize how one single decision by Col. William Oates of the Fifteenth Alabama altered both the tactical and perhaps strategic design of his commander, General Lee; and we will unpack the role this decision had in the provenance of the popular narrative of the battle. Consequently, our goal will be to situate the heroic actions of Chamberlain and his men in a more historically robust context and thereby invite deeper reflection on the appropriateness of the myth.

Lee's Strategic Vision

When General Lee calculated his various options for maneuver after the Army of Northern Virginia's astonishing victory at Chancellorsville in May 1863, neither overconfidence nor belief in his army's invincibility played a role. On the contrary, while justifiably convinced of his army's prowess and proud of what they had hitherto accomplished, Lee coolly and rationally saw the disparity in men and material that existed between the contending forces. On June 10, 1863, Lee consolidated his thoughts in a letter to Confederate president Jefferson Davis, outlining his rationale for a Northern invasion: "Conceding to our enemies the superiority claimed by them in numbers, resources, and all the means and appliances for carrying on the war. . . . While making the most we can of the means of resistance we possess, and gratefully accepting the measure of success with which God has blessed us . . . it is nevertheless the part of wisdom to carefully measure and husband our strength, and not to expect from it

² Garry E. Adelman, *The Myth of Little Round Top* (Gettysburg, PA: Thomas Publications, 2003).

Patrick O'Rourke. Courtesy of the U.S. Army Military History Institute.

more than in the ordinary course of affairs it is capable of accomplishing."³

Further, while Lee acknowledged the Army of Northern Virginia was gaining much glory for its battlefield accomplishments in 1862 and 1863, the lack of a strategic victory was proving problematic. He believed that the longer the war was prosecuted by the Lincoln administration, the more the logistical disparities would prove fatal to the Confederate cause: "We should not therefore conceal from ourselves that our resources in men are constantly diminishing and the disproportion in this respect between us and our enemies, if they continue united in their efforts to subjugate us, is steadily augmenting. . . . It seems to me that the most effective

³ Robert E. Lee, letter to Jefferson Davis, June 10, 1863, in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1880–1901), ser. 1, vol. 28, part 3, 880–881 (hereafter cited as *OR* and followed by the volume, part, and page numbers, with all subsequent citations referencing series 1).

mode of accomplishing this objective, now within our reach, is to give all the encouragement we can, consistently with the truth, to the rising peace party of the North.”⁴

Lee reached the conclusion that if the Confederacy took a defensive approach, it would merely be a question of time and attrition before it was defeated. Therefore, the only sound alternative was for the Army of Northern Virginia to take the strategic offensive and defeat the Federal Army of the Potomac on Northern soil. In early June 1863, Lee ordered his three Confederate corps to begin the long trek north from their base at Fredericksburg and commence the Northern invasion. The Federal Army of the Potomac tracked their movements northward, and the two powerful armies would ultimately collide in the small Pennsylvania town of Gettysburg.

Gettysburg Day Two: Lee Formulates His Plan

After Lee’s resounding, if incomplete, victory on July 1, in the northern outskirts of Gettysburg, the Union army fell back on the heights south of the town and began to form the well-known fishhook defensive line. Lee pondered his alternatives and decided, as always, to maintain the initiative and look for a way to follow up his success of the previous day. Given the strategic imperative facing the Confederacy, Lee believed he had no choice but to continue to press the attack, even though he faced a battlefield that was of the enemy’s choosing. Lee’s evaluation of the available alternatives was summarized in his official report: “[T]o withdraw through the mountains with our extensive trains would have been difficult and dangerous. At the same time we were unable to await an attack, as the country was unfavorable for collecting supplies in the presence of the enemy. . . . A battle had, therefore, become in a measure unavoidable, and the success already gained gave hope for a favorable issue.”⁵

As is well established in the historical account, Lee ultimately was persuaded to allow Lt. Gen. Richard Ewell’s Second Corps to continue to anchor the Confederate left flank while Lt. Gen. A. P. Hill’s Third Corps occupied the ground to Ewell’s right, parallel to the Emmitsburg Road. Lt. Gen. James Longstreet’s First Corps was just arriving on the battle-

field, having spent the night camped at Marsh Creek “four miles from Gettysburg,” so a determination of where to place him had to be made.⁶ In the absence of Maj. Gen. J. E. B. Stuart’s trusted cavalry, Lee sent out three scouting parties to the extreme Confederate right in order to determine the strength of the Federal line and its vulnerability for an attack “under Colonel Long, General Pendleton and Captain Johnston, his engineer.”⁷ Of these, “Captain Johnston’s reconnaissance had the greatest impact.”⁸

There are many mysteries associated with Capt. Samuel Johnston’s scouting mission in the morning hours of July 2; foremost was why the scouting party failed “to detect Federal units in the area between the Peach Orchard and the Round Tops and on the lower end of Cemetery Ridge, it was somehow the victim of grave misfortune.”⁹ As a result, Lee formulated his battle plan “based on the belief that the Federal presence in the Peach Orchard was minimal.”¹⁰ Relying on this faulty intelligence, Lee explained in his official report, “It was determined to make the principal attack upon the enemy’s left, and endeavor to gain a position from which it was thought that our artillery could be brought to bear with effect. Longstreet was directed to place the divisions of [Maj. Gen. Lafayette] McLaws and [Maj. Gen. John Bell] Hood on the right of Hill, partially enveloping the enemy’s left, which he was to drive in.”¹¹

Lee believed the elevated ground of the Peach Orchard area was the perfect artillery platform to continue his attack on Cemetery Ridge and quite probably on to Cemetery Hill.¹² Even today, as one walks up the Wheatfield Road, it is quite evident that the Peach Orchard sits on high ground and commands the field in its front. Unfortunately for Lee, after being pounded by Confederate artillery from the heights of Hazel Grove during the battle of Chancellorsville, Maj. Gen. Daniel Sickles, commander of the Army of the Potomac’s Third Corps, observed the same terrain and came to an identical conclusion about its expediency to the Rebels. Sick-

⁴ Lee to Davis, June 10, 1863.

⁵ OR, 27.2:318.

⁶ OR, 27.2:358.

⁷ Harry W. Pfanz, *Gettysburg: The Second Day* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 106.

⁸ Pfanz, *Gettysburg*, 106.

⁹ Pfanz, *Gettysburg*, 107.

¹⁰ Troy D. Harmon, *Lee’s Real Plan at Gettysburg* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2003), 50.

¹¹ OR, 27.2:318.

¹² For a detailed analysis that Cemetery Hill was Lee’s true intended target, see Harmon’s fine book *Lee’s Real Plan at Gettysburg*.

Elevations of various positions in and around the Peach Orchard. Map by Phil Laino.

Lee's plan for Longstreet's assault on July 2. Map by Phil Laino.

les defied commanding general George Meade's orders to remain on Cemetery Ridge and pushed his corps forward, anchoring his left near Devil's Den and extending his right to the Emmitsburg Road north of the Peach Orchard.

As for the Fifth Corps and Chamberlain's Twentieth Maine, they had not crossed the Mason-Dixon Line until July 1. They had undertaken a long day's march in midnineties-degree heat and were camped at Hanover when ordered to Gettysburg that evening around 7:00 p.m. The corps began their march at sunrise, reaching the battlefield in the early morning hours of July 2, when they were immediately ordered to participate in Meade's contemplated attack on the Confederate left. When this plan

was abandoned, the corps was marched south and was placed in reserve to the rear of the Union left, near the boulder-strewn hill now enshrined as Little Round Top.¹³

Hood Redeploys

Meanwhile, Lee's plan for the First Corps appeared uncomplicated: find the enemy's left flank, drive it in toward Cemetery Ridge, and capture the Peach Orchard area to use as an artillery platform. However, as Longstreet arrived at the presumed attack point, an immediate adjustment had to be made in the plan due to Sickles's disruptive move into the Peach Orchard. By all accounts, General Lee was

¹³ Pfanz, *Gettysburg*, 40, 62.

Gen. Joseph Kershaw. Courtesy of the U.S. Army Military History Institute.

in the area, and it is most likely that he personally approved or saw to the realignment and direction of the attack himself.¹⁴

The alignment of Longstreet's corps was now altered, but the basic plan remained the same: find the enemy's left flank and drive it in. Brig. Gen. Joseph Kershaw of McLaws's division describes the alteration that occurred as Hood's division was marched around McLaws's to seek the Army of the Potomac's left flank: "Hood's division was then moving in our rear toward our right to gain the enemy's left flank, and I was directed to commence the attack so soon as General Hood became engaged swinging around toward the Peach Orchard, and at the same time establishing connection with Hood, on my right, and co-operating with him."¹⁵

Hood's division would now occupy the extreme right of the Confederate line with McLaws on its left. McLaws's division would be deployed with its

four brigades stacked in two lines, Kershaw's brigade forming its right with "Semmes in reserve to me and Barksdale on my left, supported by Wofford in reserve."¹⁶ Kershaw was directed to attack while maintaining his connection with Hood's left so as to allow no gap to form in the line. This was not the only directive Kershaw was given: "[T]he lieutenant-general commanding directs me to advance my brigade and attack the enemy at that point, turn his flank and extend along the cross-road, with my left resting toward the Emmitsburg road."¹⁷ Consequently, Kershaw was instructed to guide on the Emmitsburg Road while maintaining contact with Hood's left.

Hood's division was formed in battle line with the same two-deep brigade configuration as McLaws's. Brig. Gen. Jerome Robertson manned the left of Hood's front line. To Robertson's right, occupying the extreme right of the Confederate battle line, was the brigade of Brig. Gen. Evander Law. Robertson was instructed as follows: "I was ordered to keep my right well closed on Brigadier-General Law's left, and to let my left rest on the Emmitsburg Pike."¹⁸ Robertson passed these orders down to his regimental commanders. Col. Van Manning of the Third Arkansas stated in his official report, "I was ordered to move against the enemy, keeping my right well connected with the left of the First Texas Regiment, and hold my left on the Emmitsburg road."¹⁹ Again, the directive was given to maintain contact with the brigade to the right while guiding up the Emmitsburg Road. Formed in battle line behind Law's brigade was the brigade of Brig. Gen. Henry Benning, and to Benning's left was the brigade of Brig. Gen. George (Tige) Anderson.²⁰

Benning's orders in the reserve line behind Law were given to him directly by General Hood: "I was informed by Major General Hood that his division, as the right of Lieutenant-General Longstreet's corps, was about to attack the left of the enemy's line and that in the attack my brigade would follow Laws [*sic*] brigade at the distance of about 400 yards."²¹ Benning's orders seemed relatively straight-

¹⁴ Pfanz, *Gettysburg*, 153–54.

¹⁵ OR, 27.2:367.

¹⁶ OR, 27.2:367.

¹⁷ OR, 27.2:367.

¹⁸ OR, 27.2: 404.

¹⁹ OR, 27.2:407.

²⁰ Pfanz, *Gettysburg*, 159–60.

²¹ OR, 27.2:414.

Gen. John Bell Hood. Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.

forward: to guide on Law and follow him into battle. Yet in the fog of war, they would prove anything but simple.

The Attack on Little Round Top

Tactically, Lee's plan envisioned an unbroken and cohesive line of battle that would guide on the Emmitsburg Road and roll up the Army of the Potomac's left flank. Longstreet's attack swept through what today has become a swath of legendary landmarks: the Stony Hill, Devil's Den, the Wheatfield, the Peach Orchard, the Triangular Field, the Valley of Death, to name but a few. Yet because of the powerful mythos created over the last several

decades, perhaps no site is as iconic as Little Round Top. As already mentioned, historians have conflicting views as to the importance of this remarkable landmark, and some basic questions must be asked: Was Little Round Top a target in Lee's attack? And what if the Rebels had captured it? As the mythical storyline would suggest, did its defense save the Army of the Potomac and therefore the republic?

It is clear from the official reports that Longstreet's battle line was to adhere as closely as possible to the Emmitsburg Road and use the pike as a guide for the attack on the Union left flank. Problems began immediately when Sickles moved his corps into the Peach Orchard area, causing the Confederate high command to make an adjustment to the attack plan. Perhaps an even greater impediment in the prosecution of the battle occurred sometime shortly after the attack commenced. Confederate command and control was disrupted by "the wounding of General Hood at the outset of the attack when a shell burst above him, driving a fragment into his left arm. It was the temporary break in leadership caused by Hood's early exit from the action that allowed the course of the attack to drift

right, rather than up the Emmitsburg Road."²²

The drift right caused great consternation for the brigade commanders in Longstreet's corps, which was well expressed by Brig. Gen. Jerome Robertson: "I had advanced but a short distance when I discovered that my brigade would not fill the space between General Law's left and the pike named [the Emmitsburg Road], and that I must leave the pike, or disconnect myself from General Law, on my right."²³ The problem stemmed from the brigade on the extreme right of the Confederate battle line. Due to the wounding of Hood, brigade commander

²² Harmon, *Lee's Real Plan at Gettysburg*, 55.

²³ *OR*, 27.2:404.

Law was suddenly thrust into division command, while brigade command descended on Col. William Oates of the Fifteenth Alabama.²⁴ Law's brigade had been detached from the First Corps and stationed in the rear of the army at New Guilford twenty-five miles from the battlefield. They had remained there until being ordered forward on July 2 at about 3:00 a.m. to march to the battlefield, where, upon arrival, they were immediately commanded to rejoin Longstreet on his march to the Union left flank.²⁵ The brigade—almost assuredly dehydrated from the summer heat and arduous march—was ordered into battle without water, as a detail sent to fill canteens failed to return.²⁶

The problem was compounded due to the natural difficulty of communicating to the partici-

²⁴ Pfanz, *Gettysburg*, 173.

²⁵ Pfanz, *Gettysburg*, 115.

²⁶ Edwin B. Coddington, *The Gettysburg Campaign* (Simon and Schuster, 1968), 391.

Gen. Jerome Robertson. From Francis Trevelyan Miller's *The Photographic History of the Civil War in Ten Volumes*.

Col. Evander Law. Courtesy of the U.S. Army Military History Institute.

pants their new roles in the army. Longstreet, in a somewhat understated manner, characterized the situation in his official report: "General Hood received a severe wound soon after getting under fire and was obliged to leave the field. This misfortune occasioned some delay in our operations."²⁷ With the advantage of historical perspective, Troy Harmon elaborates on Longstreet's comments with an even more pointed and resolute analysis: "Brigadier General Law, did not immediately assume command, leaving a power vacuum and lack of direction for the troops. In the absence of overall control, decision making devolved to subordinate unit commanders."²⁸

As Oates advanced, his Fifteenth Alabama regiment was in the center of Law's brigade. When Oates's regiment encountered Col. Hiram Berdan's Second United States Sharpshooters, the annoyance of their fire "lured the Alabamians in that direction."²⁹ As Oates himself reported, "My regiment occupied the center of the brigade when the line

²⁷ OR, 27.2:395.

²⁸ Harmon, *Lee's Real Plan at Gettysburg*, 55.

²⁹ Harmon, *Lee's Real Plan at Gettysburg*, 56.

of battle was formed. During the advance, the two regiments on my right were moved by the left flank across my rear, which threw me on the extreme right of the whole line. I encountered the enemy's sharpshooters posted behind a stone fence, and sustained some loss thereby."³⁰ Oates's chase of Berdan took his own Fifteenth and the Forty-Seventh Alabama, situated on the Fifteenth's left, to the extreme right of the Confederate battle line, where they would remain during the course of that day's battle. This preoccupation with Berdan may have been an overreaction. As Harry Pfanz observes, "The fire of the retreating sharpshooters did little real damage to the Alabama line."³¹

Still, Oates was drawn inexorably into the vortex of the Round Tops. General Law withdrew the Forty-Fourth and Forty-Eighth Alabama Regiments, which had previously been on the extreme right, and sent them to the left to fill a widening gap in the Confederate line to address a threat from Union battery fire that the brigade was encountering. Law now placed Oates in command of both the Fifteenth and Forty-Seventh Regiments, which now composed the extreme right end of the Confederate battle line.³²

William Oates, who would in his postwar career become the twenty-ninth governor of Alabama as well as a brigadier general in the U.S. Army during the Spanish-American War, would now be faced with perhaps the most impactful decision of his life. After crossing Plum Run in the shadow of Big Round Top, the topographic high point of the Gettysburg

battlefield located southwest of Little Round Top, Oates received an order from General Law to redirect his two regiments, which were drifting too far to the right: "After crossing the fence, I received an order from Brigadier-General Law to left wheel my regiment and move in the direction of the heights upon my left, which order I failed to obey."³³

This order was doubtlessly given to draw Oates away from the Round Tops and to have him assist with the attack on the extreme left of the Federal

Third Corps. As a consequence of ignoring the order to wheel, Oates followed the sharpshooters northeastward up Big Round Top to eventually encounter Col. Joshua Chamberlain's Twentieth Maine situated on Little Round Top in the skirmishes now consecrated in Hollywood lore. This disregard for orders also compelled General Robertson to move his brigade to the right in order to maintain contact with Law's brigade. As Robertson comments in his official report, "As we approached the base of the mountain, General Law moved to the right, and I was moving obliquely to the right to close on him. . . . The Fourth and Fifth Texas Regiments . . .

continued to close on General Law, to their right."³⁴ Consequently, Oates's failure to obey the direct order to wheel left pulled a large part of General Robertson's brigade into the battle for Little Round Top, while Law was ordering Oates's regiments to wheel in order to avoid that confrontation.

General Lee's view of the Round Tops on both the second and third days at Gettysburg was summarized in his official report: "General Longstreet

Col. Hiram Berdan. Courtesy of the U.S. Army Military History Institute.

³⁰ OR, 27.2:392.

³¹ Pfanz, *Gettysburg*, 217.

³² Pfanz, *Gettysburg*, 169.

³³ OR, 27.2:392.

³⁴ OR, 27.2:404.

Col. Van Manning of the Third Arkansas. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

was delayed by a force occupying the high rocky hills on the enemy's extreme left, from which his troops could be attacked in reverse as they advanced. His operations had been embarrassed the day previous by the same cause."³⁵

It would seem obvious from Lee's official report that he never contemplated that the "high rocky hills" were in any way an objective for his flank attack. In fact, Lee wrote that the preoccupation with Little Round Top "embarrassed" the attack. The Confederate attack force was pulled to the right; and when a remedial order was given by Brigadier General Law, Colonel Oates chose to ignore it, thereby depriving the primary attack of six valuable regiments: the Fifteenth, Forty-Seventh, and Forty-Eighth Alabama of Law's brigade as well as the Fourth and Fifth Texas and Van Manning's Fourth Arkansas of Robertson's brigade.

Discussion

The fact that Little Round Top was attacked with six wayward regiments—essentially only the strength

of one full brigade—while seven of Longstreet's brigades were attacking elsewhere speaks volumes as to the importance of the Round Tops as a target. In hindsight it would seem that if being attacked in reverse was a real problem, then refusing the line or keeping a force in perhaps Devil's Den after it was captured could have better served the Confederate army. Additionally, if Oates had been attacked in reverse, General Benning was following in reserve and could have flanked a Federal flanking force by his own attack in reverse.

Moreover, it is necessary to ask what Oates was going to do with Little Round Top had he managed to capture it. There were no other troops prepared to reinforce him, as the rest of the First Corps was engaged in brutal fighting; and Maj. Gen. George Pickett's division—Longstreet's lone remaining force—had not yet arrived on the battlefield. Additionally, the entire Union Sixth Corps had reached the battlefield directly to the east of Little Round Top "in midafternoon" and certainly could have

Lt. Charles Hazlett as a West Point cadet. Courtesy of the U.S. Military Academy.

³⁵ OR, 27.2:320.

been utilized to retake Little Round Top if necessary, as could have “elements of Brigadier General James Barnes Division and Brigadier General Romyn Ayers Division of the Union Fifth Corps.”³⁶

In later years, Oates described his efforts to capture both the Round Tops as an objective that should have been pursued: “[W]ithin half an hour I could convert it [Big Round Top] into a Gibraltar that I could hold against ten times the number of men that I had.” In analyzing Oates’s claim, Harry Pfanz writes, “The battle was raging below, the division was attacking, not defending. His regiments were needed on the firing line, not in a defensive position on Round Top that had no value in the situation at hand.”³⁷ Pfanz further states, “Round Top had little or no value as an artillery position in an attack that afternoon.”³⁸ Additionally, it remains a mystery where Oates would have found any stray batteries to fortify Big Round Top, for none were in the vicinity. Even if a battery had been located, Pfanz continues, “[o]ne can easily assume that the fighting for that day would have been over before any guns could have been dragged to the top of the hill.” If Oates had managed the Herculean task of placing a battery on Big Round Top, Pfanz concludes, “[t]hey still could not have been used unless trees were felled to clear a field of fire. One can then wonder what targets would have been fired at that could not have been assailed equally effectively from guns in other positions.”³⁹

As for Little Round Top, Lt. Charles Hazlett, who would be killed in action later that day, did manage to place his Fifth United States, Battery D, at the crest of that hill, but he found that “cannon placed there would not be able to depress their muzzles enough to protect themselves against a frontal assault.”⁴⁰ If Oates had been able to seize Little Round Top, it is arguable that the Union gunners could have disabled their guns before he would have captured them. But even if these guns had fallen into rebel hands, the same previously mentioned problems would have remained. So the primary problem persisted: how long could Little Round Top actually have been held? This is of

course unknown, but a reasonable answer is probably not for any protracted period. Six Confederate regiments that had taken significant casualties could hardly have stood up to the forces the Federals were capable of mustering.

The question of whether those six wayward regiments being used in the manner Lee intended would have turned the Confederate tide on July 2 is open for conjecture. But what does seem clear is that the seizing of Little Round Top did not figure in Lee’s battle plan, and its occupation by Confederate forces would have in no way proved advantageous to the Army of Northern Virginia. Consequently, despite the inarguable valor of Colonel Chamberlain, Col. Patrick O’Rourke, and all the other heroes who gallantly defended it, Little Round Top’s reputation in Civil War lore has far exceeded its true significance. As for General Lee, at the close of the second day he had not yet accomplished any of his strategic objectives. The life of the Southern Confederacy was held in the balance, and Lee concluded had no choice but to resume the offensive on July 3.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the powerful dramatizations of Colonel Chamberlain’s victory at Little Round Top are treasured cultural artifacts that have engendered popular interest in the Civil War and made the four-year struggle accessible to new generations. However, from a purely historical standpoint, the mythos these works have collectively created around the craggy igneous outcropping in Pennsylvania is not entirely justified and, in fact, serves as a cautionary tale for historians of the Civil War. While stories of heroism emerging from this great struggle are indeed intriguing and while historical accounts of the events that unfolded from 1861–1865 often contain the thrilling narrative cadence of dramatic fiction, there is a need for more critical scholarship that is less prone to the apotheosis of individual figures. Certainly, as is the case with Little Round Top, the complexity of the reality is just as compelling as the venerable myth, if not more so.

Contemporary social critics have interrogated the tendency of American culture to privilege the fabricated, inauthentic, and theatrical above the natural and genuine—to convert reality into stage-

³⁶ Harmon, *Lee’s Real Plan at Gettysburg*, 60.

³⁷ Pfanz, *Gettysburg*, 508n40.

³⁸ Pfanz, *Gettysburg*, 508.

³⁹ Pfanz, *Gettysburg*, 508.

⁴⁰ Pfanz, *Gettysburg*, 223.

craft.⁴¹ Certainly, the valorization of Chamberlain on Little Round Top can be seen as an example of this dynamic at work: history filtered through the aggrandizing lens of Hollywood. However, as experts such as the late Joseph Campbell have powerfully argued, myths are regenerated in every generation, and thus no story or history is ever immutable.⁴² Thus, with regard to future scholarship, we urge students of the battle to embrace a responsibility to promote less simplistic narratives and to redress the misapprehensions perpetuated by more facile renderings of the war's events. Equally, artists and storytellers can create works for public dissemination that reflect more accurately the complex narrative of history and still retain wide commercial appeal. The deeds of these remarkable men who fought the Civil War need not be trumped up beyond their actual impact, as their true heroism matches—and perhaps exceeds—any story, myth, or illusion that fiction can conjure.

⁴¹ Chris Hedges, *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle* (New York: Nation Books, 2009); Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Vintage, 1962).

⁴² Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988).

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