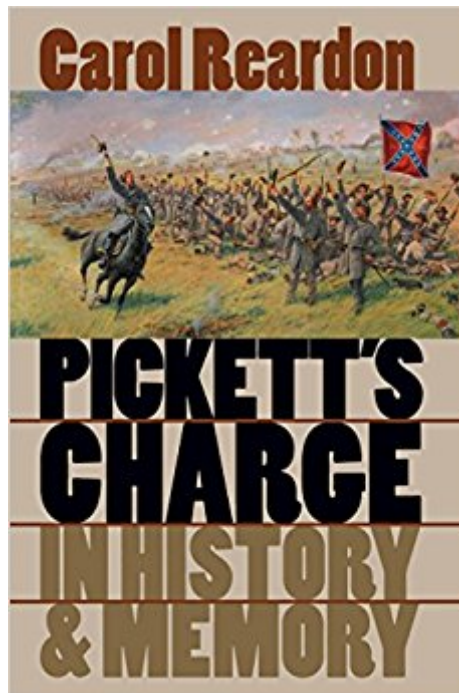




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Pickett's Charge In History And Memory (Civil War America)



Synopsis

If, as many have argued, the Civil War is the most crucial moment in our national life and Gettysburg its turning point, then the climax of the climax, the central moment of our history, must be Pickett's Charge. But as Carol Reardon notes, the Civil War saw many other daring assaults and stout defenses. Why, then, is it Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg--and not, for example, Richardson's Charge at Antietam or Humphreys's Assault at Fredericksburg--that looms so large in the popular imagination? As this innovative study reveals, by examining the events of 3 July 1863 through the selective and evocative lens of 'memory' we can learn much about why Pickett's Charge endures so strongly in the American imagination. Over the years, soldiers, journalists, veterans, politicians, orators, artists, poets, and educators, Northerners and Southerners alike, shaped, revised, and even sacrificed the 'history' of the charge to create 'memories' that met ever-shifting needs and deeply felt values. Reardon shows that the story told today of Pickett's Charge is really an amalgam of history and memory. The evolution of that mix, she concludes, tells us much about how we come to understand our nation's past.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Ms. Reardon's wonderful book underscores the challenge that we all face as we read and attempt to separate fact from fiction and fancy. This book is a case study in the mysterious confluence of objective history and subjective history. Ms Reardon deftly takes the reader from July 3, 1863, the

day of Pickett's Charge, to the present day and shows how elusive the truth is. As an avid student of the American Civil War in particular and history in general, I learned three very important lessons from Ms Reardon. First, the thundering violence and confusion of battle make the search for the truth exceedingly difficult. The actual participants in Pickett's Charge were able to vividly and tellingly relate their emotions at the time. However, their reports of actual events and actions were understandably contradictory. Second, as Ms Reardon illuminates throughout the book, the careful reader must consider the possible motives of the author while reading the work. Ms Reardon demonstrates that the Virginia Historical Society was more interested in protecting state pride than searching for the truth. The numerous instances of conflicting accounts of this single day of the Civil War reminds me of Richard Nixon's response to the question of how history will judge him: "It depends on who writes the history". One can call Nixon's response cynical, but Ms Reardon reminds us that the wise reader will possess a healthy skepticism. Finally, when one pores through a Civil War book, or any book on warfare for that matter, the reader must understand that the neat maps of the terrain and the formations belie the utter confusion, terror, and violence inherent in battle.

This book ranks among a tiny handful of works that anyone who really wants to understand history and historical processes, military or otherwise, should read. The title grossly understates the real subject. In concepts and content, this book stands with John Keegan's *The Face of Battle*, Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Carl Builder's *The Masks of War*, and Viktor Frankel's *Man's Search for Meaning* for insights into how individual human minds and groups work, turn isolated events into memory and history, and then have large-scale influences. Even among these, only Fussell and Reardon tie the threads together. With *Pickett's Charge* as a case study, Carol Reardon's project is two-fold. First she traces how a small, bloody episode in a long, bloody war quickly and irreversibly became attached to and glorified a minor figure in that episode. Second she traces how, in popular memory and myth, that episode came to codify that entire war. In carrying out these two projects, she hits at a complex array of core issues on several levels. For example, she analyzes how soldiers perceive, imbed in memory, privately recall, reprocess, and publicly retell their experiences. What she says of combat veterans applies equally to survivors of many kinds of catastrophe. She shows how the innate human desire to make sense of isolated bits of experience and, thus, achieve meaning in our lives, drives people to impose an artificial order on and attach extraneous material to experience that distorts memory and any record of an event. The elements and dynamics she describes apply equally well to any human experience and to any

historical sources and topics.

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