

## Contents

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List of Illustrations . . . . .	viii
Preface . . . . .	ix
Acknowledgments. . . . .	xv
1. The Background to Gettysburg. . . . .	1
2. Opening Moves of the Campaign. . . . .	15
3. Stuart, Lee, and the Role of the Cavalry . . . . .	34
4. Lee's Orders before Gettysburg. . . . .	49
5. The Great Debate over the Orders . . . . .	64
6. Options for the Ride North . . . . .	80
7. Stuart's Conduct of the Ride North . . . . .	98
8. The Battle as It Unfolded . . . . .	116
9. The Consequences of Stuart's Raid . . . . .	141
10. Stuart and the Defeat at Gettysburg. . . . .	151
Notes. . . . .	167
Bibliography . . . . .	185
Index . . . . .	193

## Illustrations

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### Figures

1. Gen. Robert E. Lee . . . . .	4
2. Gen. Jeb Stuart . . . . .	5
3. Lee, Jefferson Davis, and the Confederate cabinet . . . . .	10
4. President Lincoln reviews Hooker's army . . . . .	20
5. Battle of Brandy Station . . . . .	21
6. Battle of Aldie . . . . .	22
7. Battle of Upperville . . . . .	23
8. Col. John Singleton Mosby . . . . .	44
9. Harpers Ferry . . . . .	83
10. The Berlin Ferry point . . . . .	89
11. Rowser's Ford . . . . .	103
12. A Union army supply wagon . . . . .	105
13. Stuart's cavalry on the march . . . . .	107
14. Hanover Junction railroad bridge . . . . .	108
15. Carlisle barracks . . . . .	111
16. Col. George H. Sharpe . . . . .	125
17. Gen. David M. Gregg . . . . .	133
18. Gen. George A. Custer . . . . .	133
19. Gen. Judson H. Kilpatrick . . . . .	133
20. Union cavalry attacks at Falling Waters . . . . .	160

### Maps

1. The Gettysburg campaign . . . . .	18
2. The mountains and the Loudon Valley . . . . .	81
3. The Hotchkiss map of the Loudon Valley . . . . .	88
4. Stuart's possible routes north . . . . .	95

## Preface

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Gen. James Ewell Brown (J. E. B., “Jeb”) Stuart is firmly placed alongside Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson in the front rank of Confederate heroes. He seems to epitomize the lost cause—the bold young cavalry leader of the legendary Army of Northern Virginia who “died game” at the head of his troops. History has been kind to him, and his reputation has grown over the years.<sup>1</sup> But he has always had his critics, and even in his lifetime he was more than a little controversial. Some said he was more concerned with making flamboyant gestures and enhancing his personal reputation than with winning battles or advancing the cause of the South. His role in the Gettysburg campaign of June–July 1863, in particular, cast a shadow over his other accomplishments and has become the subject of countless books and articles.

The problem was that Stuart was not with the Army of Northern Virginia when it made its fateful march into Pennsylvania in mid-1863 and did not rejoin it until the second day of the battle at Gettysburg. Lee later wrote that the army had been “embarrassed” by the absence of the cavalry, stirring up a controversy that has never died. Lee’s statement is an indirect indictment of Stuart, for he *was* the cavalry. Why were Stuart and the cavalry absent? Did Stuart’s absence mean that he disobeyed Lee’s orders, or was Lee himself to blame because he gave faulty orders? Did Stuart’s absence really affect the outcome at Gettysburg? All these questions have been debated endlessly, and the literature itself is a battleground, highly partisan, built around selective quotations from the written record

and sympathetic interpretations that ignore inconvenient evidence, all full of high spirits and zealous advocacy.

Can anything new really be added to this century-old debate? The answer is yes, and this work takes a fresh look at the controversy. I briefly review the background, planning, and conduct of the campaign by both sides. Most of this contextual material is familiar, and my documentation is to the well-known or (*Official Record*), to firsthand accounts written by participants after the war, and to the standard secondary sources. I look once again at the relevant details of how events unfolded in the last week of June and the first few days of July 1863. I reexamine the famous orders from Lee to Stuart, and I also look at the best-known of the voluminous literature that has grown up around these communications, including some of the truly imaginative literary “deconstructions” that have been attempted.

The zealous advocacy of many of these previous authors has not always made for good historical detective work, and, remarkably enough, some important issues of context, timing, and geography have been all but overlooked in this extensive literature. Moreover, important new evidence and interpretations have emerged in recent works by Edwin Fishel, Stephen Sears, Joseph Harsh, and others that contribute to our reexamination of Stuart and Gettysburg.

I look also at Stuart’s role in the army, as he and Lee understood that role, before and after Gettysburg; at the cavalry’s assignment in the Gettysburg campaign as understood by all concerned; at Stuart’s actual conduct of his ride north; and at the effect of Stuart’s absence on the unfolding of the campaign and its final outcome from both the Northern and Southern points of view. I am able to solve some minor mysteries and clarify several apparent inconsistencies in previous historical interpretations.

This new look convinces me that what took place is actually very straightforward. Stuart did not, in fact, “disobey” the letter of his orders from Lee. Lee trusted Stuart and allowed him considerable discretion about the particulars of the move north, because that is

how he had always operated with Stuart and most of his other subordinates. This was Lee's mistake and perhaps the major flaw in his generalship.

There was, indeed, some grammatical confusion in the orders Lee issued to Stuart, but this really made no difference to the outcome. Stuart must have known what was expected of him, for he was to do what he always did when the army was on the move. But Stuart followed his own agenda and undertook an unauthorized raid on Washington rather than scouting and screening for the army as Lee had intended. Stuart must have been aware that he was going well beyond the real intent of his orders, but he hoped for a new triumph that would justify his actions. These mistakes, first by Lee and then by Stuart, were a major reason the battle of Gettysburg unfolded the way it did, with unfortunate results for the Confederate cause.

In short, Lee did not give precise, to-the-point orders and was wrong to trust Stuart, but Stuart knowingly stretched his orders to the limit, thereby abusing Lee's trust and abdicating his proper role as the army's chief of cavalry. Does this conclusion constitute an indictment of Lee or Stuart? Hardly. It simply reminds us that no military leader—Lee, Stuart, or Napoleon!—has ever been infallible. Misunderstandings, poorly written orders, and outright errors of judgment occur even on the part of great generals. This random element is part of the fascination of military history. Lee and Stuart will continue to be military models on the strength of their accomplishments before and after Gettysburg. But it is important for us to understand how their poor judgment contributed mightily to the Confederate defeat at Gettysburg, a defeat that was very important in the larger scheme of things.

No doubt the Lee-Stuart-Gettysburg controversy will continue. Stuart was and is an enormously attractive historical figure, and each generation produces new advocates to defend him. The tone is perhaps often a bit more shrill than need be, but this is how Stuart himself conducted his debates. On the other hand, one cannot

help but be struck that Lee recognized his mistake and blamed no one but himself, whereas Stuart, having abused Lee's trust, wrote a wildly inaccurate after-battle report that blamed everyone else in sight. His self-justifying report on the cavalry's role was twice as long as Lee's much more matter-of-fact report on the whole campaign. Perhaps it is just as well for his reputation that Stuart did not survive the war.

The judgment of many observers at the time was that with Stuart in his proper place the campaign would have developed differently and there might not have been a battle at Gettysburg at all. Lee could have fought and quite possibly won a battle on ground of his own choosing elsewhere. Furthermore, many observers at the time thought such a victory would have changed the outcome of the war. Many authors on Gettysburg have ignored the evidence that Lee (and Jefferson Davis) expected to win a military triumph in Pennsylvania and were sure such a victory would be so severe a psychological blow to the North's will to fight as to lead to a negotiated settlement. It seems clear that they planned the campaign to this end and had made preparations for the peace negotiations they hoped would cap the whole venture.

Obviously we cannot be sure this would have happened. Even if Lee had won a great victory in the campaign, the war might have dragged on. Much would have depended on how Lincoln as well as the Northern public reacted to a new defeat, and no one can know this. Students of these matters will continue to speculate about such imponderables as long as we study the Civil War. But understanding a bit more fully the magnitude of the Confederate failure at Gettysburg provides new fuel for this speculation.

A final note on historical accuracy is in order. Much of this re-examination—much of any historical reexamination—rests on the retrospective accounts contained in books and articles written by the surviving participants well after the events took place. One has no choice but to use such material, but it is distinctly uneven in accuracy. The “fog of war” continues long after the battles are over. It

is worth remembering the cautionary comment by one of the chief compilers of the *Official Record*.

The experience of this office has demonstrated the utter unreliability of recollections of the war. I have had a Union colonel apply for permission to retract a statement never made in his report on Balls Bluff. A general officer has complained that his report of Shiloh was garbled, but when shown his original report he acknowledged that it was correctly printed. Again, a Confederate major general denied ever having made a report that he saw noted in our catalogue, and on inspection it was found to be in his own handwriting and he so acknowledged. As another instance, I would mention that an attempt to ascertain who commanded a certain Confederate brigade in the Gettysburg campaign has developed two claimants for the position.<sup>2</sup>

Even with the most scrupulous effort at accuracy, uncertainty continues to exist. History remains one of the liberal arts, not one of the sciences.