

A Conversation with Dr. Gregory Urwin



I speak with Dr. Gregory Urwin about CENFAD's upcoming "All Roads Lead to Gettysburg" Conference, which will be hosted April 6th, 2024 at the Temple Center City Campus. Dr. Urwin shares his experience in the field, how the conference came to be, and why Gettysburg remains a popular topic.

Joseph Johnson: Thank you for joining me this afternoon to discuss the upcoming conference. For starters, what inspired you to do this conference now?

Gregory Urwin: Well, Dr. McPherson offered me the opportunity about a year ago. He

had not topic in mind, but I thought that this would be a natural fit. I've been helping to lead the ROTC annual staff ride, which most of its iterations goes to Gettysburg. So, this is a subject that I focus on annually.

And it's a place that is the Mecca for all Civil War buffs. That's why I thought the title of the conference, "All Roads Lead to Gettysburg," would be apt. If you're interested in the Civil War, and you have the means, you will get there sooner or later. Being a crossroads, of course, is what makes it part of a battlefield. Where the two armies were maneuvering in South Central Pennsylvania, late June and early July of 1863, all roads, indeed, led to Gettysburg. That's what brought them into contact and allowed them to concentrate against each other fairly quickly.

Gettysburg was the biggest battle of the American Civil War, the biggest battle ever fought on North American soil. Because of its size and some of its dramatic elements, many view it as the war's turning point. The so-called high watermark of the Confederacy, even though the Civil went on for nearly two more years and the Union came close to succumbing to war weariness during the following year, due to the record breaking casualties that occurred; especially in Northern Virginia, where Grant and Lee squared off against each other. But still, Gettysburg has this appeal – for a lot of white southerners, especially those descended from Confederate bears. There's this

“What if?” factor, this penalizing question that we have Faulkner to thank for when he wrote “Absalom, my Absalom, for every Southern boy it’s the afternoon of July the 3rd, 1863.”

The guns were roaring, pounding Federal Troops on the cemetery. Rage and pickets. Thirteen thousand are about to step off, and if you’re there, you’re thinking “Maybe this time we’ll be able to go all the way. Open road to Washington.”

It’s like the many ways the theme of the movie Gettysburg. So even though you know Gettysburg was not a decisive battle, it’s imbued with that kind of mystique. But the fact that it was so big and so bloody makes it important enough. It was the Union Army of the Potomac, which were beaten so regularly by Robert E. Lee, which probably did its best fighting at Gettysburg. That reorientation took away some of the inferiority complex acquired at places like Second Bull Run, Fredericksburg, and Chancellorsville.

But, I should also that it’s important as are all these other history and memory project. There’s been an awful lot of scholarship done on Gettysburg. It’s the most written about battle in American history. For instance, micro-histories focus on certain phases and certain units. Little Round Top gets a lot of

coverage; Pickett’s Charge gets all that coverage. There are people interested in what a young brigadier general named George A. Custard is doing on the Union right flank late on July third.

In recent decades, though, the scholarship has moved in directions other than conventional military history. You know there are books

on Gettysburg in history and memory, books on the meaning of Gettysburg, books on memorialization, especially now Confederate memorialization, and books on Gettysburg after the war and what happened to that town. Books

looking at the various factors that combine to make it a tourist trap for the history-minded. Some people have looked at the free blacks of Gettysburg, and other have looked at the role that women played, or the roles that women had imposed on them by the invading armies.

So I just thought that it’s popular. Hopefully it will draw people. What would you do if you threw a conference and nobody came? There’s also interesting work to be done on it. You could put together a conference that would please the traditionalists, including the legions of buffs, but also one that would get into a lot of freshly broken ground, causing people to contemplate questions they had never contemplated before.

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JJ: This might beleaguer your point, but I wonder. One hundred and sixty years later, you've point to all of the reasons that Gettysburg is still so popular and so present in the American mind. But considering there has also been one-hundred and sixty years of scholarship on the battle, what kind of opportunities does Gettysburg specifically offer to widen our perspectives? Do you see a bottom to the mine of Gettysburg sources?

GU: No, I don't because there are some aspects of Gettysburg that have been done to death, and there are others that have been lightly touched on, or not at all. I mean, there are any number of books about the iron per day, or on the same five regiments from the northwest, with those who dressed a little different than the rest of their comrades, and were considered part of a fighting elite of the Union of the August Potomac. And there are other units that gave the last full measure of devotion that haven't gotten much coverage. There are all kinds of different ways now to attack the regimental history, which has been a standard, and Civil War studies going back to the 1880s. Veterans, once they started retiring, began writing up the histories of their units, trying to make sure they got all the credit that they deserve for their various feats of valor.

It is possible to do demographic studies. Take a Confederate unit and try and get a grip on how many of its members actually own slaves, or were related to slave owners. The connection between slavery and the

Lost Cause could take a unit, like the First Minnesota, which suffered close to 80% casualties at Gettysburg. You could these regiments which were recruited on a local basis with all the members in a population pool from the same county, or two or three counties. Some from a single town, or a single ward in New York City. You could take one of these units that gained all this glory by emulating themselves, and then look at the community whence it sprang in the years following the Civil War and try to gauge the impact of that. With the shortage of males of a certain, how that impacted the female population. Would there have been more localities open to bringing in immigrants to remedy labor shortages? Stuff like that. So Gettysburg could be used as a springboard for all kinds of studies.

JJ: I think you present a litany of options that could be pursued. But I also think you highlight something interesting in your comment about how some aspects have been 'done to death.' With that in mind, are there other significant battles from the Civil War that you think demand attention similar to what Gettysburg receives?

GU: Well, some weren't as big. Gettysburg was important because it repulsed the second invasion. In and of itself, that's significant. You could say Fredericksburg where they repulsed attacks by the army of the Potomac, but the army wasn't crushed. It was able to be defeated in December and come back in May. I guess the taking of Richmond.

All of these things are intrinsically interesting to me, being a military historian. And again, people have done books on the German troops, who were the biggest immigrant group to supply troops to the Union army. They were the biggest group to enter the United States in the two decades before the Civil War, they outnumbered the Irish by about two-to-one, and a lot of them were in the part of the Potomac called the Eleventh Corps. They were routed at Chancellorsville and then they were routed again at Gettysburg, which led to all kinds of ethnic slurs, like being called 'The Flying Dutchmen.' It had an impact on the German-American community. They went to war because they came over thinking the United States is the last, best hope for liberty, and they weren't going to let the fire be snuffed out by a slaveholders rebellion. They also thought that this would gain them more

acceptance with the WASP population, but instead they had some rough time and end up being mocked and ridiculed.

So a lot of German American withdrew within their ethnic communities, and that remained the case down to World War One. It's

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one reason why German-Americans faced so much suspicion and persecution during WWI, not only because the hatred that the administration generated through propaganda for all thing German, but they had strong cultural connections within their communities.

So, there is one way you can use the Civil War battles to try to understand broader social and political developments in the post-Civil War years. People have done imaginative things. A book on the Battle of Wilson's Creek, early in the Civil War, and the different regiments made from different towns, and different localities. These authors dissected these regiments into their local components and wrote the battle from that perspective, which told us thing about the nature of antibiotics and what happened at Wilson's Creek.

You get tens of thousands of people and together and thousands of documents are being generated.

Reports from the army level, all the way down to the regiment or the battery level. And then a lot of these guys are writing letters, or keeping diaries. Some of them write memoirs afterwards. One of the neat things about working with the Civil War is the high level of literacy, which was up to ninety percent among Northern soldiers. There is no lack of documentation, new stuff keeps surfacing when people pull a trunk out of their attic.

I think it will remain a field of fruitful research. I had a student defend an interesting dissertation last spring, and I've got another Civil War dissertation in the works. People are interested, not just scholars. Regular folks will read something they're interested in. They will devour it.

JJ: Why do you think the Civil War maintains that very broad public appeal? Is it just because it involves United States citizens in a particular way? Or the mythologizing of events?

GU: Oh, there are a lot of things. The fact that it was fought here. People live near these battlefields, or live near places where other things happened. And the fact that the generation that fought it left such a record. The generation that fought it became the first interpreters of the way, and weren't just putting out publications. What we today call Memorial Day was Decoration Day back then. Those ceremonies honoring the Union and Confederates. Civil War veterans were happy to tell their stories. For

instance, my wife, her father used to tell her that back in the 1920s, in Brooklyn, Civil War vets would come to class and talk about their experiences. He's telling this to his daughter, who liked history in the 1960s, so these Civil War veterans were alive for some time. When she was in college, one day an envelope arrived from her father. It had a clipping saying that the last Civil War veteran died in 1959, or something like that, all that was in there from his was a note saying 'You were alive when Civil War veterans were alive.'

Even if you don't live near the battlefield, you know the squares of so many towns, both North and South, have these granite or bronze boys in blue or gray standing eternal vigil. Not so many Confederate ones now, but they serve as a kind of daily reminder.

And then, the Centennial. I was born in 1955, so I became aware of the world around me when the Centennial hit – that was really a big deal. A lot of white Americans latched onto that as a counterpoint to the stuff that was happening with the Civil Rights movements. It attracted an awful lot of attention, with various publications, television shows, and toy manufacturers put out blue and gray Civil War soldier toy sets, and Civil War soldier guns, sabers, caps, and things like that. It kind of took the place of the Walt Disney Davy Crockett raccoon skin cap craze of the 1950s. But these children grew into adults and their interest remained keen.

They made a big market for the Civil War. Historical art arose, especially in the 1980s, the Ken Burns series reaffirms the Central importance of the Civil War in their minds. The people already felt that way drew in news fans. The movie *Glory* comes out, reminding people about the African American role in the war. This perfect storm starts swirling in the late 80s and then the movie *Gettysburg*. The re-enacting community increases in size at this time, and hits its apex. It has subsided in recent years as a result of COVID, along with the hit on battlefield visitation at Gettysburg and elsewhere.

JJ: Public history initiatives are struggling across the country. It's interesting to see how these battlefields are able to maintain an audience.

GU: Each one has a dramatic arc. There's a winner, there's a loser, there's courage and sacrifice. A lot of people find that kind of story irresistible. It's funny, too. People get really zealous about promoting their closest battlefield. When I lived in Arkansas, people often referred to Pea Ridge as the 'Gettysburg of the West.' Further west you have Arizona, which also has a 'Gettysburg of the West.' I often wonder if people who live around Gettysburg think of it as the 'Pea Ridge of the East.' But that's part of the allure of all this.

JJ: Thank you for that explanation about the rise of the popularity of the Civil War. It is easy to take for

granted these days, as it is so present in our culture.

GU: We have basic meme that we went out and freed the world, we saved the world from the Nazis, and Japanese tyranny, and that was certainly the message that was cultivated during the Cold War. That's what America does. We go out, we fight tyranny, that kind of thing. We're the saviors of the world. And we still feel that way. Some of our leaders are trying to arm Ukraine, and using this position as motivation for arming Israel. We may not be as keen to go and fight their battles for them. But, still, we'll be the leading democracy as we once were.

JJ: To step away from all this content for a second, you mentioned at the beginning of this interview that Dr. McPherson reached out to you about doing this without a subject in mind. Was this a conference you had been planning on beforehand?

GU: Not until he broke the subject last year. I had no idea, I wasn't lobbying for anything like that. It's very generous. So I wondered what to do. There are so many things to do, but I wanted it to be something that had a chance of drawing a number of presenters and an audience. I thought, 'why not?' We're in Pennsylvania. The book that just came out, *The Road to Gettysburg*, and I thought we could use that. The author even proposed a paper.

JJ: Yes! Troy Hardin will be at the conference. With him in mind, what

kind of research should attendees to the conference expect to see?

GU: When we put out the call for papers, we expressed that we're open to anything. Conventional military history, command and control phases of the battle, but we're also interested in cultural studies. Gettysburg as a symbol. We're open to studies on Lincoln as he related to Gettysburg, studies that touch on race, memorialization, the impact of the battle on the civilian population, anything like that.

We cast a wide net, and we got a wide array of responses. We have people dealing with Gettysburg in a global context, which certainly goes beyond conventional wisdom. This includes a topic on German and Polish participants, and a paper on a French officer. Someone is looking at Lincoln in a philosophical view and what he thought of Gettysburg, how he used it to advance the Union. Gettysburg and civil rights, so we're looking at Gettysburg in the 1960s rather than the 1860s.

I'm delighted. We've got people from all over the US, including a presenter from the Army War College, a ranger and historian at the National Park, one presenter from as far away as England.

JJ: One final question. Does this conference relate to any research you're currently conducting?

GU: Aside from keeping abreast of Gettysburg literature for the staff ride, I published an article in Gettysburg Magazine, which is a

journal put out by the University of Nebraska press twice a year. Right now, I'm working on about the British invasions of Virginia in 1781. And, I suppose, what led me to this project was being a recovering Civil War historian, because it deals with military history and race, which is something that interested me in my own Civil War work.

JJ: Well, I look forward to continuing to work with you on this project. Thank you for your time!