

Book Review

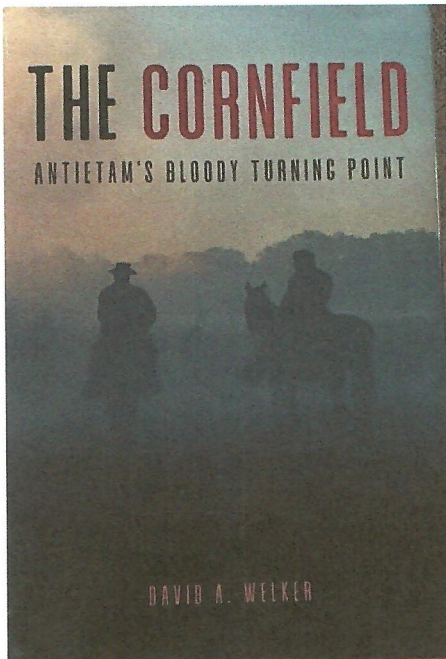
Welker, David A. *The Cornfield: Antietam's Bloody Turning Point*. Philadelphia: Casemate Publishers, 2020. Hardcover, 26 maps, photos, notes, bibliography, index. ISBN: 978-1-6120-0832-5. \$34.95.

Review by James A. Rosebrock

There has been a need for an in-depth and objective battle narrative that focuses on the Antietam Cornfield and incorporates the plans, execution, and impact of the Cornfield fight on subsequent actions at the Battle of Antietam. David Welker, at last, delivers that work. Mr. Welker is a professional historian for the U.S. Government and the author of two other highly regarded books: *Tempest at Ox Hill: The Battle of Chantilly* and *A Keystone Rebel: The Diary of Joseph Garey*.

Mr. Welker begins with a thought-provoking analysis of Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan's approach to planning the Battle of Antietam. There is much for the reader to think about here. Welker offers that in McClellan's thought process, reason, not emotion or intuition, should guide decision-making. He refutes popular assertions that McClellan was not a risk-taker and in fact demonstrates that McClellan believed that

great things entail great risks. An example is the Peninsula Campaign where McClellan put his army on ships and undertook a risky flanking maneuver against uncertain landing conditions and unknown enemy positions. McClellan mitigates and manages great risks by deliberate, thorough planning. In the dynamic and changing situation of the tactical battlefield, however, Welker submits that McClellan's style of command amounted to little more than managing the battle and reacting to events, not taking the initiative and steering events in a path necessary to reach victory.



This may be a more controversial stance, but Mr. Welker's position is worth reading and considering.

Chapter Two is an excellent telling of the road to Antietam and the maneuvers of both armies to Sharpsburg during the first two weeks of September 1862. The tight, crisp description of the opposing army's moves and countermoves in 15 pages is highly valuable and a clear summary of the leadup to America's bloodiest day. The author believes that General Lee misjudged the Federal response to his entering Maryland. Like many students of the battle, he characterizes the discovery of Special Orders No. 191 as an "intelligence windfall." Other recent scholarship by historians like Steven Stotelmyer rebut this position and offers that the measures that McClellan took on September 14 were the result of orders and plans directed the day before and that at the most, the lost orders merely verified McClellan's perception of Lee's plans. The author's well written account of the lead up to the battle is excellent.

The author refutes assertions by some historians that McClellan "telegraphed" his move in crossing the Upper Bridge under the noses of observing Confederate cavalry on the afternoon of September 16. He asserts that McClellan *wanted* Lee to know about the move, compelling the Confederate command to move troops from other parts of the line. Hooker's objective was not to defeat the entire Confederate army but to occupy the Dunker Church plateau. With another attack by Maj. Gen. Ambrose Burnside's Ninth Corps on the southern flank, the author maintains General McClellan's main attack was to be against Lee's center. Here Welker describes the main attack to be by Federal troops of the Fifth and Sixth corps. In fact, the original plan called for the Second and Fifth corps to make the attack, with the Sixth corps acting as a reserve when it arrived from Rohrersville.

Mr. Welker introduces a fascinating concept of intermediate goals. For Hooker to reach his primary goal of the Dunker Church, he had to capture the two intermediate goals of the Cornfield and the East Woods which were a salient pushed forward by "Stonewall" Jackson. The author contributes a new concept to battlefield scholarship here which will be the subject of much conversation by students of the Maryland Campaign who seek out this book.

The heart of this book is the detailed battlefield narrative of the action in the Cornfield. Welker unpacks the fighting in the Cornfield in a very impactful and effective way. He paints a clear visual image of the Cornfield area as a tactical box surrounded by woodlots to the north,

west, and east. This characterization is another new idea that students of the Maryland Campaign will certainly further discuss and analyze. What I found to be particularly valuable throughout the book is Welker's constant insertion of date and time stamps that allow the reader to know where and when he is at all times in the action.

Welker examines the actions in minute detail from the preliminary movements during the night before the main action through all of the back-and-forth punches and counterpunches of the rival armies. We accompany the combatants and through their compelling and powerful first-hand accounts, observe leadership, bravery and cowardice, and experience the terrible sights, sounds, smells, pain, and visceral terror of the bloody Cornfield.

There is often a tendency for writers who cover the entire battle, to move past the Cornfield after Hood's attack. Welker however avoids this and rightly spends the necessary time and detail discussing the arrival of Brig. Gen. Joseph Mansfield's Twelfth Corps and credits (rightly) the role of Brig. Gen. Alpheus Williams in turning the tide of the Cornfield fight. We see the arrival and repulse of Maj. Gen. John Sedgwick's division, Greene's advance to the Dunker Church, and finally, the expedition by Maj. Gen. J.E.B. Stuart at the end of the day to turn the Federal right flank.

The book is deeply researched and uses 75 manuscript and unpublished works as well as over 200 published sources.

A few spelling errors ("Calvalry" in the list of maps) and dates (1962 instead of 1862) are very minor distractions. On the artillery side, however, the author describes the Federal guns of position as "dozens of batteries lining the eastern bank of the Antietam [that] had opened without any apparent reason other than to join the growing bombardment." In fact, a count of the batteries on Ezra Carman's maps shows the number of batteries to range around ten. On page 24, where he describes the Federal wing structure, he places Burnside on the left and Franklin on the right when it was the other way around.

The Cornfield: Antietam's Bloody Turning Point is a satisfying read that tells the story of the climactic fight for the Cornfield clearly and compellingly. It should be on the bookshelf of every student of the Maryland Campaign.