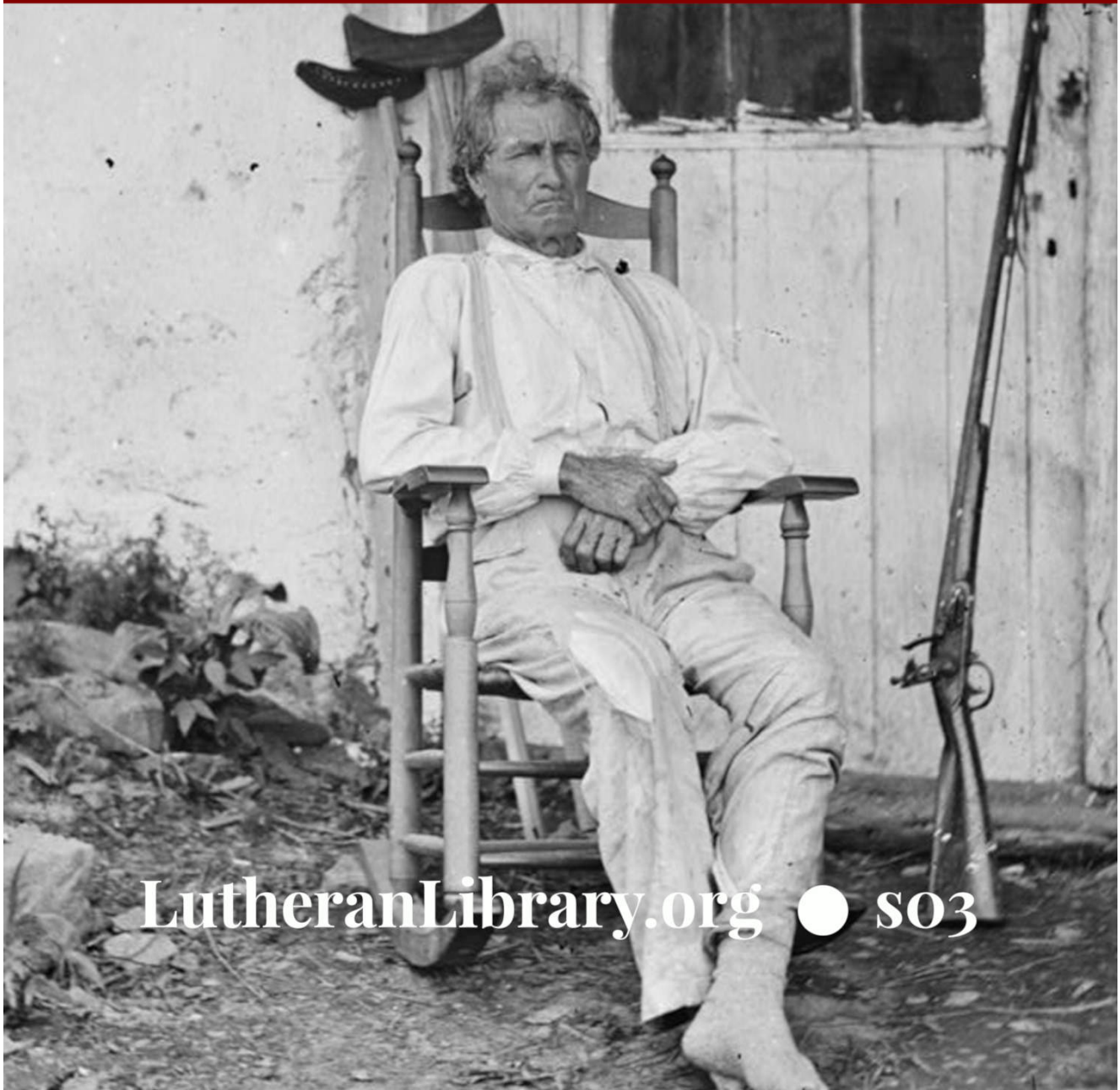


Edmund Wolf

John Burns Hero of Gettysburg



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John Burns: Hero of Gettysburg

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Preface by Lutheran Librarian

In republishing this book, we seek to introduce this author to a new generation of those seeking authentic spirituality.

EDMUND JACOB WOLF (1840-1903) was “a writer of history, a teacher of history, and himself a great part of the history of our Lutheran Church in recent times.” (W.E. Parson) He earned a doctor of divinity degree from Franklin and Marshall College, and a law degree from Wittenberg College.

“Dr. Wolf was a model preacher, but especially in this that he preached God’s Word, not human philosophy. He preached the comforts of the Scripture truth rather than the terrors of the law... Dr. Wolf’s real life-work was in the professor’s chair. He settled down to the life of a student and teacher at the age of thirty-three, and for nearly that many years more was one of the most influential forces in the making of the pastors for our General Synod Churches.” (W.E. Parson)

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John Burns At Gettysburg.

JOHN BURNS IS NO MYTH. The mediocre critics who make a reputation for themselves by destroying the reality of their superiors have not had a sufficient lapse of time to extinguish the personality of the hero of Gettysburg. They may have annihilated the historic substance of Wilhelm Tell, and reduced to creatures of the imagination others illustrious in story and song, but the sepulchre of John Burns is with us to this day, and the ground which witnessed his devotion and valor is still trodden by his contemporaries and fellow-townsmen, some of whom are envious and some proud of his singular distinction.

The skeptical historian intent on extinguishing the glory of John Burns will doubtless rival the exploit of the notable phrenologist, who without knowing his subject, was asked on the occasion of a visit to Gettysburg to examine the cranium of one of our oldest and plainest citizen. Having made a very deliberate exploration of the various bumps on his head and looking very wise, he announced the result: a born coward! It was the hero of Gettysburg on whom the canting humbug pronounced this verdict. John Burns was a sheer reality of flesh and blood, for many years a citizen of Gettysburg, well known for certain eccentricities and possessed of a mind somewhat enriched and invigorated by extensive reading. And John Burns was no fraud as a soldier.

It may be that on that July morning, when the cannon were roaring in our immediate front, and a storm of leaden rain and iron hail was sweeping over these fields, the old man came out here to hunt his cows, though 10 o'clock P. M. is not the usual time for hunting stray cattle. It may be that Gettysburg cows have a way of wandering over these parts. I have a vivid recollection of having at one time myself spent some hours out here looking for a lost bovine, but on that particular morning there was not a large contingent of Gettysburgers looking for cows around this particular neck of the woods. Either old Burns was the only man who then owned a cow in Gettysburg or he was the only man who valued the source of his milk and but-

ter sufficiently to go searching for it into the midst of the fire of two great armies. Hunting for cows was not a fashionable pastime hereabouts on July 1, 1863. It was a good deal more fashionable to hunt for a subterranean region where strong men preferred their coffee without cream.

It may be that this sturdy teetotaler took his medicine that morning from the wrong bottle, and that landing accidentally among the troops of two armies he was so drunk that he could not tell a Union soldier from a Confederate, but this charge reminds one of the famous retort of Lincoln when some one complained to him of General Grant's drinking habits: "I wish I knew where he gets his whiskey, I should like to buy a lot of it for some of the other generals." (If there ever was any good whiskey John Burns must have drunk the last of it on that eventful morning.)

The fire that glowed in John Burns was not set aflame by ardent spirits. It was burning there in 1812 when he fought for his adopted country against the British. It was glowing in his breast when at the age of almost three-score and ten [70 years] he immediately on the outbreak of the Civil War, sought to enlist in the regiment commanded by his townsman, Col. C. H. Buehler. Rejected here, because beyond the regulation fighting years, the same patriotic ardor made him apply later for a place in Capt. E. B. McPherson's company, which became connected with the Pennsylvania Reserves, and when finally he despaired of a place in the ranks he proceeded to Washington to secure any position in which an old man might render service to his country, and there he was at last put in charge of a team bearing the daily rations of the boys in camp.

This martial ardor was burning and flaming in the heart of the old man whenever he heard of Southern raids being made on Northern soil; for he was wont, with the utmost fervor, to urge his fellow citizens to accompany him to the mountain fastnesses, where, like Leonidas with his 300 Spartans, they might in some narrow defile stem the progress of the invader.

If there is some diversity of opinion as to the exact part he bore in the bloody engagement which took place on the field before our eyes, this circumstance brings him into the good company of the chief actors in the battle of Gettysburg. I am not aware that historians, even those who were on the ground, and were participants in the struggle, are unanimous in their descriptions of the part taken by Meade, or Sickles, or Hancock, or Howard, or Lee, or Longstreet. If these illustrious captains are subjected to various criticisms, and the luster of their soldiership is not dimmed by the detrac-

tions of unfriendly writers, surely the fame of John Burns can endure it, if divers opinions about his deeds of valor have found their way into local gossip or public print.

It has not diminished the glory of Homer nor depreciated the value of his immortal contribution to literature, that seven Greek cities contended respectively for the honor of his nativity, neither have any laurels been torn from the brow of Burns by the fact that two regiments connected with different brigades claim the honor of his having fought in their ranks.

The sober, unadorned historic feat which suddenly raised John Burns to indelible renown is this: When the enemies of his country on that fateful forenoon were about to encounter the army of the Union, and when the cave-dwellers of this ancient borough – many of them his juniors by thirty or forty years – were making themselves secure with their wives and children, this old man seized his flint-lock, replenished his powder horn, filled his pockets with bullets, and after vainly urging his neighbors to accompany him, sallied forth alone out to the firing line. Twice his application to enlist had been denied, but now that the enemies' guns are heard at his hearthstone and he sees the Union army marching out to give battle, all military regulations are flung to the winds. The time to fight has come, and no conventional restrictions can longer hold back the lion-hearted and fiery patriot. For such a spirit once aroused only one thing was left to do – to destroy those who were seeking the destruction of the republic. And nobly he hurried to the spot where the fire was hottest, “towards where the noise of battle smote the air the loudest, with set teeth and furrowed brow,” while the missiles of death were whizzing and striking all around him, through throngs of wounded and dying men, he pushed his way to the forefront, intent on sharing the danger of sturdy veterans.

He first reached the 150th Pennsylvania Volunteers, and requested that he might join the fighting, but Col. Wister, not caring to be responsible for a civilian found with arms, discouraged him and advised him to find a tree in the woods with our troops, for there was more prospects of safety; the intrepid fighter had, however, not come out to look for a place of safety. He was looking for an enemy to hit. He had gone into the thick of the fray to offer his life, not to save it. What he wanted was the best place to fight, and he was not long in making his way forward to the skirmishing line – the most exposed position.

He now fell in with the Seventh Wisconsin regiment, a part of the Iron Brigade, just going into action. Having received the first infantry fire of the battle and charged and captured the firing force, this regiment was being thrown to the front where continuous firing was kept up with shot and shell whistling and bursting around the main line. "At this time," says Col. Callis, from whom these particulars have been secured, "I saw an object approaching from the rear, and I think the oddest looking person I saw during the war. He wore a bell-crowned hat, a swallow-tailed coat with rolling collar and brass buttons and a buff vest. He had on his shoulder an old rifle with which he came to a present arms and then said: 'Colonel, is this your regiment?'"

"Yes," I said.

"Then he brought his rifle to an order and said: 'Can I fight in your regiment?'"

"I answered: 'Old man, you had better go to the rear or you'll get hurt.'"

"And he replied just as a shell burst near him: 'Tut! tut! tut! I've heard this sort of thing before!'"

"These words were spoken in a tremulous voice. I again ordered him to the rear, when he replied, 'No, sir, if you won't let me fight in your regiment I will fight alone.' I asked him where his cartridge box was, he patted his trousers pocket and said: 'Here's my bullets,' and taking an old-fashioned powder horn from his pocket, 'Here's my powder, and I know how to use them. There are three hundred cowards back in that town who ought to come out of their cellars and fight, and I will show you that there is one man in Gettysburg who is not afraid.'"

"The boys made merry over his swallow-tailed coat and yellow vest and broad-rimmed hat – an incarnate facsimile of Uncle Sam – but Sergeant Eustis plead with the Colonel 'to fix him up, he'll soon get tired of it and go home.'"

The Colonel at last relented and the old flintlock was exchanged for a rifle just captured from Archer's sharpshooters. "He was given a cartridge box and belt, but declined to use these new fangled things and instead filled his pockets with fixed ammunition, after which he went into the ranks. He soon grew restless as the general engagement had not begun, and advanced to the front towards our skirmishers before he could see a rebel to shoot at. Pretty soon I saw a Confederate officer riding towards their advance line, mounted on a white horse. Burns drew on him and the horse galloped

through our lines without a rider. Whether the officer was killed or not I do not know. The old man loaded and fired away until I called in my skirmishers and ordered my men back to the Seminary.”

Sergeant Eustis, of the same regiment, corroborates Col. Callis’ testimony. He says: “We boys commenced to poke fun at him, thinking him a fool to come up where there was such danger. He surprised us all when the rebels advanced, by not taking a double quick to the rear, but he was just as cool as any veteran among us. We soon had orders to move a hundred yards to the right, and were shortly engaged in one of the hottest fights I ever was in.” It was doubtless in this engagement that Burns received his wounds, one in the arm, one in the leg, and several minor wounds in the breast, and in this disabled condition he was left on the field when our troops were driven past his humble homestead up to Cemetery Hill.

Abandoned by those in whose ranks he had fought he realized his peril at being caught as a “bushwhacker” when the enemy was approaching, and he managed to crawl away from his gun and to bury his ammunition. Questioned by an officer whether he had not been in the ranks he stoutly denied having been a combatant, and insisted that he had gone out seeking some help for his invalid wife. The officer gave credit to this piteous story and ordered the wounded noncombatant to be cared for. A rebel surgeon dressed his wounds, by nightfall he dragged himself to the cellar door of the nearest house, whence he was conveyed to his home in a rickety bone-wagon by a horse too decrepit to be wanted by the enemy, and there, with bullets still crashing over his head, he received medical care from the late Dr. Charles Horner, whose widow and daughters are still with us.

Nothing that others may say in behalf of the subject of this monument can have the weight of the testimony borne by the general in command of the Army Corps which fought the battle on Seminary Ridge.

“My thanks,” says General Doubleday in his official report, “are especially due to a citizen of Gettysburg, named John Burns, who although over seventy years of age, shouldered his musket and offered his services to Col. Wister of the 150th Pennsylvania Volunteers. Col. Wister advised him to fight in the woods, as there was more shelter there, but he preferred our line of skirmishers in the open fields. When the troops retired he fought with the Iron Brigade.”

John Burns was of course not the only hero of the battle. There were some 80,000 of the same heroic mettle, meeting and overwhelming an army

which for discipline, courage and valor has never been surpassed.

Neither was he the only citizen of Gettysburg who went forth to encounter the invader. Not waiting for the Southern legions to reach our very doors, one hundred men and boys started for the front as soon as they heard of the enemy crossing the Potomac. They hastened to Harrisburg, proud to be the first company of the panic-stricken Commonwealth to enlist in that crisis.

They were soon joined by other organizations and formed into a regiment which was honored by having in its ranks a brave boy destined to become the distinguished Governor of Pennsylvania, Samuel W. Pennypacker, and that very regiment was on the field of Gettysburg in advance of all other troops, ready to give battle to the foe.

The fact is that at the time of this great battle there was not left in town a considerable number of men capable of braving arms. This county furnished as large a proportion of soldiers as any other commonwealth and the county-seat contributed its full share of these.

But Burns stands out singular and above all others in several respects. He was at least twenty years past the age for bearing arms. He had twice been rejected as too old for enlistment.

He knew full well what it meant for an un-uniformed civilian to be captured in the military ranks, and knew, too, that if wounded he could claim no pension, if slain, his family was entitled to no benefit from the government. So, too, he lacked the incentive which inspires and impels the officer, who faces wounds and death, conscious that glory awaits the brave. He took an obscure position, laughed at and jeered by the boys in blue, intent only on this one thing, smite the insolent foe of his country. That his devotion and daring were most extraordinary and unique is put beyond question by the fact that in all the raids and invasions made north of the Potomac and the Ohio, there is not another instance recorded of a civilian leaving his home and without uniform or ceremony joining the troops in repelling the invader. The only parallel found in our annals is that of Mollie Pitcher, who when her husband fell on the memorable day at Monmouth took his place at the cannon, an act of singular daring, which brought her the thanks of Washington and a commission as sergeant in the Continental Army.

As Washington recognized the extraordinary valor of the heroine of Monmouth, so did Lincoln show honor to the hero of Gettysburg, when on the occasion of the dedication of the National Cemetery, November 19,

1863, he visited this field and delivered that immortal address, Burns along with thousands of others was introduced to him at nightfall just before he started to an assemblage in the Presbyterian church. The day had been one of splendid pageantry, though to the President, moving over the scenes of a sickening carnage, it must have been a day of unspeakable sorrow, but he seems to have forgotten every other consideration in his resolve to do honor to the aged civilian, who defying every peril, had thrown himself upon the altar of his country.

Surrounded and followed by cheering crowds the great-hearted and noble President linked arms with the plain and fearless citizen, and together they walked around center Square and up Baltimore street, a picturesque contrast, the President towering head and shoulder above the crowd, Burns, a fleshy little body, vainly attempting to keep step with him, the former having on that morning delivered a speech that will survive until liberty dies, the latter just recovering from wounds, received in a patriotic feat, which has scarcely a parallel, the Chief Magistrate of the Republic and an obscure representation of the common people. And so our national Congress honored him, placing his name by a special act upon the pension roll of the country – that, too, at the very time when the State of Pennsylvania bore him on a similar roll, for his services in the war of 1812, and now this grand old Commonwealth, proud of her son, adds to her own laurels by the erection of this monument in commemoration of his superlative heroism.

And we do well, fellow citizens, in rendering here, on the anniversary of his daring feat, this final tribute to the memory of our townsman, who so surprisingly and justly so, became one of the most famous characters of the war of the Union. Who can estimate the debt which our nation owes to such a spirit of self-sacrifice and unmeasured devotion, what strength it derives from this species of moral fiber, what independence and security, what majestic and glory accrue to the Republic from a citizenship which in any crisis and at any cost springs to its defense.

Such men, high-minded, self-sacrificing men, “Men who know their rights and knowing dare maintain,” constitute the life-blood of the State. The poet sings:

“Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,
Where wealth accumulates and men decay.”

Wealth is accumulating among us at an appalling rate. Let us see to it that men do not decay – for the increase of wealth has seldom failed to result in moral and national decadence. Let us see to it by the spirit of eternal vigilance that America continue to produce a race of men like John Burns, and our place in the forefront of the great world powers will be held as long as the granite and bronze of this monument, here dedicated to personal heroism and valor.

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