

Praise for *The Tale Untwisted*

“Who Lost the Lost Orders? is the greatest single mystery of the Civil War. But chasing its answer has frequently distracted attention from the larger mystery of what George B. McClellan did with the discovery of the Lost Orders. For almost a century-and-a-half, opinion has followed McClellan’s legion of critics in blaming him for ‘dawdling,’ even with the greatest intelligence coup of the war in his hands. Gene Thorp and Alexander Rossino beg, very pointedly, to differ. In *The Tale Untwisted*, they offer an alternative view, with McClellan in heated pursuit of the Confederate army, managing a badly demoralized and hastily improvised Army of the Potomac and deploring a lackluster surrender of Harpers Ferry that ought never to have occurred.”

— Allen C. Guezlo, author of *Robert E. Lee: A Life* and *Gettysburg: The Last Invasion*

“Thorp and Rossino make a very persuasive case for McClellan having received the Lost Orders in mid-afternoon and sending his dispatch to Lincoln at midnight on September 13, 1862. If I were writing my Antietam book today, I would follow their account.”

— James M. McPherson, author of *Crossroads of Freedom: Antietam*
and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Battle Cry of Freedom*

“This well-documented and logical explanation of the controversial Lee’s ‘Lost Orders’ debate finally puts the actions of General George McClellan in a proper context. Before a single Union soldier took a step in response to any order based on finding S.O. 191, Lee remarked that he found the Union army ‘advancing more rapidly than convenient.’ Now we know why.”

— Thomas G. Clemens, ed., *The Maryland Campaign of September 1862*, Vols. 1-3

“A clear, extremely well-researched study exploring when Lee’s famous ‘Lost Orders,’ S.O. 191 came into McClellan’s possession, and how he responded to them. Anyone with an interest in the 1862 Maryland Campaign will find it a fascinating and illuminating read.”

— D. Scott Hartwig, author of *To Antietam Creek: The Maryland Campaign of September 1862*

THE TALE UNTWISTED

*General George B. McClellan, the Maryland Campaign,
and the Discovery of Lee's Lost Orders*

Gene M. Thorp & Alexander B. Rossino



Savas Beatie
California

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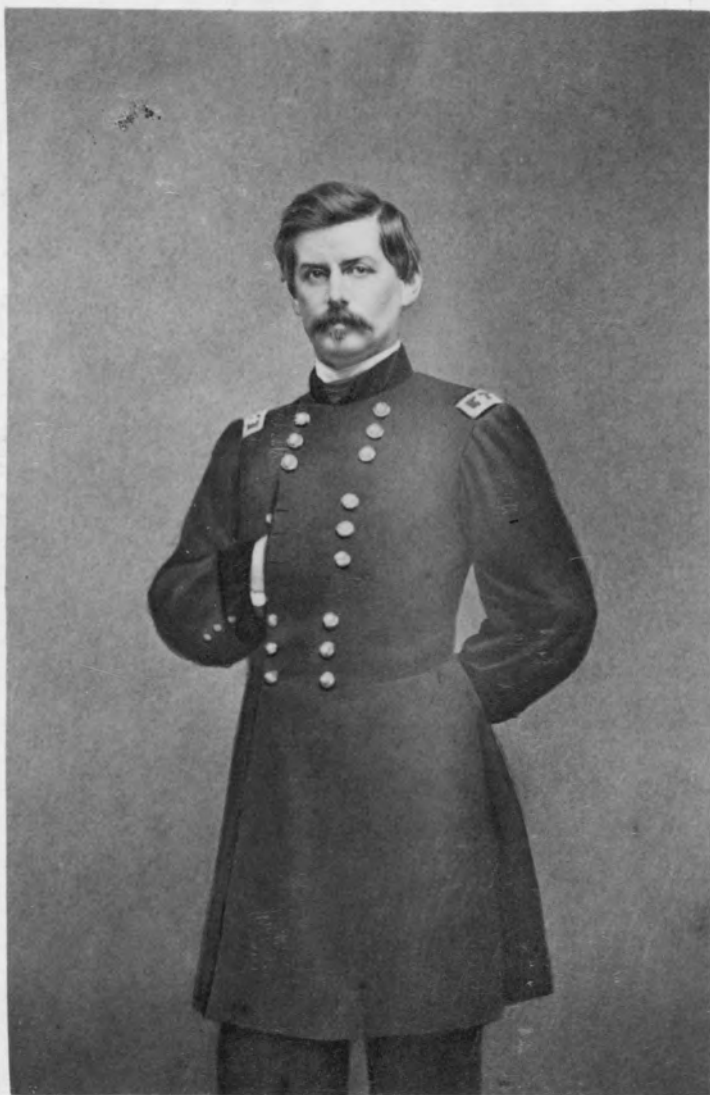
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For my grandfather Robert Edwards, whom I never met in life, but whose books and legacy inspired my interest in this tragic period of American history.
— Gene Thorp

For my grandfather Clifford Mersereau, who introduced me to the history of the American Civil War.
— Alexander Rossino



GEN'L. GEO. B. McCLELLAN.

Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1861, by M.
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trict of Columbia.

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Acknowledgments

Gene and Alex came to the subject of George McClellan and the Lost Orders from different directions. Gene's views on George B. McClellan evolved tremendously over time. His awakening to the other side of the McClellan story came during many camp fire talks with living historians whom he fell in with as a volunteer at the Antietam National Battlefield Park. Among this group of experts, William Sagle was especially prominent in convincing Gene to reevaluate his opinion of the general. Jeff Driscoll of the same group then introduced him to the tremendous volume of Civil War primary source materials available. Gene is deeply indebted to both for challenging him to be a better historian.

For Alex's part, he discovered Gene's deep knowledge of McClellan while researching *The Guns of September: A Novel of McClellan's Army in Maryland, September 1862*. After comparing notes, he realized before long that we had more than enough material to produce a detailed study of McClellan and the Lost Orders. The product of our combined efforts is the book in your hands.

Many other individuals contributed to bringing us where we are now. We are grateful to Maurice D'Aoust for his discovery and publication of Lincoln's midnight time-stamped version of the so-called "trophies" telegram. We appreciate the valuable insight and strong support and encouragement Moe has provided since Gene's 2012 online debate with Stephen Sears in *The Washington Post*.

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Preface

The book you are now holding is a greatly expanded version of an essay published as part of Savas Beatie's Civil War Spotlight series in 2019. That earlier essay, available in digital format only, focused tightly on the events of September 13, 1862, when troops with the Army of the Potomac's Twelfth Corps discovered a mislaid copy of Robert E. Lee's Special Orders No. 191 lying in a field near Frederick, Maryland. Passing up the chain of command, the "Lost Orders," as they have come to be known, eventually reached General George B. McClellan, who used the information contained in them to lead his army to its fateful clash with Lee's Army of Northern Virginia at South Mountain, and shortly afterward, at Antietam Creek.

Publishing online presented challenges for those of the reading audience who wanted a hard copy of the essay for their Civil War book collections. We also received numerous requests for more information concerning General McClellan's direction of the Maryland Campaign from the beginning of September until the eve of the South Mountain fight on September 14. This expanded version of our study provides the new information requested and a great deal more, including sections on the historiography of the Lost Orders debate and an exploration of Civil War-era telegraphy meant to clarify where the incorrect "12 M" timestamp on McClellan's "trophies" telegram to President Lincoln on September 13 might have originated.

It is our hope that this study answers many of the questions we have received from readers of the earlier digital essay. We anticipate as well that this study will clear up flawed interpretations of the evidence that historians and others have used over the years to unjustly criticize McClellan's performance in Maryland. Had the general not risen to the task and provided the shattered Federal army in the east

with capable leadership, the United States as it existed might have permanently ceased to be. Defeating Lee north of the Potomac in September 1862 saved the Union at its moment of greatest peril and George B. McClellan deserves praise, not condemnation, for having accomplished it.

Gene M. Thorp & Alexander B. Rossino
Glenwood & Boonsboro, Maryland
September 2021

“I have thus far abstained from any public reply to the various criticisms and misrepresentations of which I have been the subject, and shall probably preserve the same attitude during the remainder of my life.

Certainly, up to within a brief period, party feeling has run so high that the pathway for the truth has been well-nigh closed, and too many have preferred to accept blindly whatever was most agreeable to their prejudices, rather than to examine facts. . . . I have, therefore, been able to maintain a calm front under abuse, and—while far from claiming immunity from error—have remained satisfied with the conviction that, after my death at least, my countrymen will recognize the fact that I loyally served my country in its darkest hour.”

— Major General George Brinton McClellan,

Nov. 8, 1881

(four years before his death).

Chapter 1

How We Got Here: The History of Writing about George McClellan and Lee's Special Orders No. 191

Every so often one of the American Civil War's most enduring controversies erupts into public awareness, stirring renewed debate among historians and enthusiasts alike. One of those controversies is whether Major General George Brinton McClellan, commander of the Army of the Potomac, dawdled after receiving a mislaid copy of Robert E. Lee's Special Orders No. 191 on September 13, 1862.

The lost orders were discovered in a field southeast of Frederick, Maryland, three days after Confederate troops marched out on September 10, providing McClellan with Lee's operational plan for the capture of Harpers Ferry. The "Lost Orders," as they have come to be known, clarified to McClellan the meaning of various pieces of information that had been coming in for several days from Governor Andrew Curtin of Pennsylvania, General Alfred Pleasonton's cavalry, President Abraham Lincoln, and the War Department in Washington. These disparate sources painted a jumbled and often conflicting picture of Rebel movements, with some stating that Confederate columns had been spotted in Hagerstown, while others said Rebel troops were crossing the Potomac River back into Virginia at Williamsport.

With Lee's orders in his hands all of these scattered bits now made sense to McClellan. He understood that Lee had split his army into multiple columns, that taking Harpers Ferry was Lee's immediate objective, and that the opportunity had presented itself to destroy the separated parts of the Army of Northern Virginia in detail. This information enabled "Little Mac," as many of the men in his army

fondly called him, to devise a plan for attacking Confederate forces at the gaps in South Mountain.

Federal troops with the Sixth, Ninth, and First Corps did exactly this on September 14, successfully driving Lafayette McLaws's, James Longstreet's, and Daniel Harvey Hill's portions of the Rebel army back toward Virginia, effectively wrecking Lee's plans. Yet despite the passage of more than a century and a half debate about the steps McClellan took—or failed to take—continues to swirl. Exactly when this controversy began and why it has persisted for so long are fascinating tales in themselves because it is the things written about the Lost Orders over the years that first fanned the flames of controversy into life and which keeps them burning to this day.¹

Thanks to leaks from the Army of the Potomac (or possibly the War Department) information about the discovery of Special Orders No. 191 first appeared in major newspapers within days after McClellan had received them. The *Washington Star* reported on September 15, 1862, that, “A member of Colonel Colgrove's regiment found a paper purporting to be Rebel Order No. 119.”² Although someone clearly leaked this information, there does not appear to have been any explicit political intrigue connected with it. Indeed, politics did not figure into the picture until 1863 after George McClellan himself attempted to defend his actions during the Maryland Campaign by passing a copy of the orders to his friend William Cowper Prime.³

Prime, the editor-in-chief of the New York *Journal of Commerce*, a newspaper critical of the Lincoln administration's handling of the war, published the orders on January 1, 1863. McClellan then testified in March of that year before the congressional Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War that he had been handed Lee's orders at Frederick. This news became public in April with the release of the committee's official report, but while criticism of McClellan by the committee certainly provided the backdrop for these events, no controversy

1 This chapter examines writing on the Lost Orders from the predominant Northern and European perspectives. It is not a comprehensive review of all the literature dealing with the subject. Literature produced by Southern authors in the latter half of the 19th century has not been included as it tends to focus on the issue of who lost Special Orders No. 191 and not on what George McClellan did with the information he learned from reading them.

2 Stephen W. Sears, “The Twisted Tale of the Lost Order,” in *North and South*, Vol. 5, No. 7 (Oct. 2002), 61 and Scott M. Sherlock, “The Lost Order and the Press,” in *Civil War Regiments: A Journal of the American Civil War*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (1998).

3 Sears, “The Twisted Tale,” 60.

erupted concerning his handling of Special Orders No. 191.⁴ Just the opposite occurred, as the committee, being more interested in the conduct of the Peninsular Campaign and allegations that McClellan had not done enough to support John Pope before the Battle of Second Bull Run, made barely any inquiries about the conduct of the Maryland Campaign. To all intents and purposes, the discovery of the Lost Orders proved to be a non-issue.

This might have remained the state of affairs had two important events not occurred: the announcement in October 1863 that McClellan intended to run for president on the Democratic ticket in 1864 and the publication in February 1864 of a 480-page report written by McClellan defending his time as the Army of the Potomac's commanding officer. Intended to justify the decisions he had made and rebut accusations that had surfaced during the Radical Republican-controlled Joint Committee hearings, McClellan recounted succinctly in his report that, "On the 13th [of September 1862], an order fell into my hands issued by General Lee, which fully disclosed his plans."⁵

This bland statement of fact might have gone unnoticed had McClellan not followed it up with the assertion that he "immediately gave orders for a rapid and vigorous forward movement" to save the endangered Federal garrison at Harpers Ferry. This claim contradicted on-the-record comments made by General-in-Chief of the army Henry W. Halleck before a military commission investigating the circumstances surrounding Harpers Ferry's fall in September 1862.⁶ Testifying that, "after having received orders to repel the enemy invading the State of Maryland, [McClellan] marched only six miles per day, on an average, when pursuing this invading enemy." Halleck implied that the general had been guilty of foot-dragging when the relief of Harpers Ferry required swift action. To this Halleck added, "in his opinion he (McClellan) could, and should have relieved and

4 U.S. House of Representatives, *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War in Three Parts* (Washington, DC, 1863), 439. Referred to hereafter as *JCCW*. Bruce Tap, *Over Lincoln's Shoulder: The Committee On the Conduct of the War* (Lawrence, KS, 1998), 137 concluded in his study that following McClellan's dismissal from command by President Lincoln in November, "When Congress met in December 1862, the committee launched a five-month effort to ensure that McClellan and his notion of limited war remained politically and militarily vanquished." This illustrates just how powerful the general's enemies were in Washington.

5 George B. McClellan, *Report on the Organization and Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac* (New York, NY, 1864), 353.

6 For the complete record of the military's investigation see *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 Vols. (Washington, DC, 1880-1901), Series 1, Vol. 19, Part 1, 549-803. Cited hereafter as *OR*.

protected Harper’s Ferry,” a statement with which the commission said it fully concurred.⁷

In other words, the accusation of tardiness that subsequently became a hallmark of Little Mac criticism started with Henry W. Halleck in an effort to shift blame from himself for the disaster that befell Col. Dixon S. Miles and his men at Harpers Ferry. Halleck proved so successful at contriving this bit of subterfuge against McClellan that even President Lincoln shared the belief, telling Senator Orville Hickman Browning in November 1862 that McClellan “could and ought to have prevented the loss of Harper’s Ferry, but was six days marching 40 miles, and it was surrendered.”⁸

The release of McClellan’s report lit a bonfire of public criticism, prompting William Swinton, a wartime correspondent for the *New York Times*, to pursue a literary scorched earth campaign against the now Democratic party presidential candidate. Swinton railed mercilessly against McClellan’s command decisions in a series of articles published by the *Times* from February through April 1864. These screeds, published as a collection by the Radical Republican Union Congressional League under the provocative title *McClellan’s Military Career Reviewed and Exposed: The Military Policy of the Administration Set Forth and Vindicated*, made it clear from the outset that Swinton did not intend his critique to be an honest comment on military policy. Rather, he contrived from the very beginning to influence the outcome of the presidential race, arguing in the first sentence of his first column that General McClellan, “Having won whatever reputation he enjoys in the field of *war* . . . is now running on this reputation as the Presidential candidate of a party whose creed is *peace* . . . [he] will only be certain of being President of our country when it is certain we have no country at all.”⁹

Turning to the general’s lengthy report, Swinton lambasted it as “an elaborate political manifesto” produced by a man “struck by the fever of the White House . . . while his soldiers were being struck down by thousands with the fevers of the Chickahominy.” McClellan sought to “vindicate his conduct and arraign the Administration” in his “so-called ‘Report,’” argued Swinton, demanding a critical analysis of the document out of concern for “the welfare of the country not less

7 OR 19:1, 786, 800, and McClellan, *Report*, 355.

8 Theodore C. Pease, ed., *The Diary of Orville Hickman Browning, Volume I, 1850-1864* (Springfield, IL, 1925), 590.

9 William Swinton, *McClellan’s Military Career Reviewed and Exposed: The Military Policy of the Administration Set Forth and Vindicated* (Washington, DC, 1864), 3.

than the truth of history.” Swinton self-righteously dedicated himself to this task, promising

to pierce to the historical truth underlying the veneer which General McClellan has spread over event[s], to endeavor to seize by the guiding-clue of unpublished dispatches how much here set down as original motive is really *afterthought*, and to examine the foundation of the charges which he heaps upon the Administration. If I do not succeed in proving by documentary evidence that *every one of General McClellan's failures was the result of his own conduct and character* [emphasis added]—if I do not prove his career as a whole to have been a failure unmatched in military history, and if I do not fasten upon him conduct which in any other country in the world would have caused him to be court-martialed and dismissed the service,—I shall ask the reader to accept his plea in abatement of judgment and accord him the patent of distinguished generalship.¹⁰

Following this declaration of intent, Swinton proceeded to develop the disparaging portrayal of McClellan's “flaws” and “failed decisions” that remains with us to this day. He dissected McClellan's claims from the Peninsula Campaign about the overwhelming strength of the enemy while minimizing the number of his own men, accusing the general of producing “a series of winnings and whimperings for troops, the most extraordinary ever put on record.” Swinton questioned McClellan's complaints about the weather hindering his operations and statements that the men of his army were neither disciplined enough nor sufficiently well-trained to take the field. He outlined McClellan's refusal to promptly execute orders, accused him of foot-dragging, described his reluctance to bring on engagements, and argued that after the reverse experienced outside of Richmond McClellan, “brought back an army demoralized, worn down by useless toil, [and] reduced by sickness, almost unmatched in the annals of war.”¹¹ To all of this Swinton added the undermining of John Pope, closing with the statement that while he had hitherto questioned McClellan's capacity as a commander, the failure to support Pope called into question even the general's loyalty to the nation.

Turning finally to the Maryland Campaign, Swinton pontificated that it was not his purpose to review it in detail, his true aim being

not so much to dissect the historical facts themselves as to *dissect General McClellan's character and conduct* [emphasis added]. . . . We are presented with the same characteristics of

10 Ibid., 4. The emphasis on “afterthought” is Swinton's.

11 Ibid., 8 and 24.