

# Bill Bryson

## The Lost Continent

**On another continent, 4,000 miles away, I became quietly seized with that nostalgia that overcomes you when you have reached the middle of your life. I wanted to go back to the magic places of my youth – to Mackinac Island, the Rocky mountains, Gettysburg – and see if they were as good as I remembered them...**



I drove to Gettysburg, where the decisive battle of the American Civil War was fought over three days in July 1863. There were over 50,000 casualties. I parked at the visitors' centre and went inside. It contained a small museum with glass cases containing **bullets**, brass buttons, belt buckles and that sort of thing. There was little to give you any sense of the battle itself.

One interesting thing was a case devoted to the Gettysburg Address, where I learned that Lincoln was invited to speak only as an afterthought and that everyone was taken aback when he accepted. It was only ten sentences long and took just two minutes to deliver. I was further informed that he gave the address many months after the battle. I had always imagined him making it more or less immediately afterwards, while there were still bodies lying around. The truth, as so often in this life, was disappointing.



I went outside and had a look at the **battlefield**, which sprawls over 3,500 acres of mostly flat countryside, fringed by the town of Gettysburg with its gas stations and its motels. The battlefield had the great deficiency common to all historic battlefields. There was nothing much to distinguish this stretch of empty fields from that one. You had to take their word for it that a great battle was fought there. There were a lot of **cannons** scattered about, I'll give them that. Through my dad's old binoculars I could clearly see how troops had advanced from the direction of the town, a mile or so to the north, sweeping across the Burger King parking lot, skirting the Tastee Delite Drive-in and re-grouping just outside the Wax Museum and Gift Shop. It's all very sad. Ten thousand soldiers fell there in an hour, two out of every three Confederate **soldiers** didn't make it back to base. It's a pity, that so much of the town of Gettysburg has been spoiled with tourist tat and that it is so visible from the battlefield.

When I was little, my dad bought me a Union cap and a toy **rifle** and let me loose on the battlefield. I was in heaven. I dashed about the whole day crouching behind trees, **blowing up** parties of overweight tourists with cameras around their necks. Now, however, I found it difficult to summon any real excitement for the place.

### **Glossary**

#### **The Gettysburg Address**

a famous speech made by President Lincoln after the battle

#### **The Confederate army**

the army of the southern US states

#### **The Union army**

the army of the northern US states