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What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, And The Civil War



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SOLDIERS, SLAVERY, AND THE CIVIL WAR

CHANDRA MANNING



Synopsis

A vivid, unprecedented account of why Union and Confederate soldiers identified slavery as the root of the war, how the conflict changed troops' ideas about slavery, and what those changing ideas meant for the war and the nation. Using soldiers' letters, diaries, and regimental newspapers, Chandra Manning allows us to accompany soldiers "black and white, northern and southern" into camps and hospitals and on marches and battlefields to better understand their thoughts about what they were doing and why. Manning's work reveals that Union soldiers, though evincing little sympathy for abolitionism before the war, were calling for emancipation by the second half of 1861, ahead of civilians, political leaders, and officers, and a full year before the Emancipation Proclamation. She recognizes Confederate soldiers' primary focus on their own families, and explores how their beliefs about abolition "that it would endanger their loved ones, erase the privileges of white manhood, and destroy the very fabric of southern society" motivated even non-slaveholding Confederates to fight and compelled them to persevere through military catastrophes like Gettysburg and Atlanta, long after they grew to despise the Confederate government and disdain the southern citizenry. She makes clear that while white Union troops viewed preservation of the Union as essential to the legacy of the Revolution, over the course of the war many also came to think that in order to gain God's favor, they and other white northerners must confront the racial prejudices that made them complicit in the sin of slavery. We see how the eventual consideration of the enlistment of black soldiers by the Confederacy eliminated any reason for many Confederate soldiers to fight; how, by 1865, black Union soldiers believed the forward racial strides made during the war would continue; and how white Union troops' commitment to racial change, fluctuating with the progress of the war, created undreamt-of potential for change but failed to fulfill it. An important and eye-opening addition to our understanding of the Civil War.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

It is my opinion that this book is the beginning of the end for the claim that the predominant cause of the Civil War wasn't slavery. Slavery was the primary single issue and it was the issue that energized most of the other issues that contributed to the war. Having stated that, I intend simply to summarize how she did her research and some of her conclusions. Manning's book is the beginning of the end for other causal explanations because she relies on the testimonies that should bear the most weight, i.e., the wartime letters home of the men in blue and gray who fought at Gettysburg, Vicksburg, the Wilderness, Cold Harbor, Shiloh and all the other horrific battles of the war. Her research is pretty amazing and should first be assessed by looking at her list of Primary Sources in the back of the book which is organized by state. She traveled to every state that was involved in the Civil War and roamed through 45 local libraries and historical societies. She went through larger collections like those of Military History Institute of the U.S. Army and the Library of Congress. She read published collections of Civil War letters and innumerable state documents relating to the War. Her focus was on the enlisted man and on letters actually written during the war rather than memoirs that were written in the postwar years. She gathered biographical data of the various correspondents whose letters she collected and noted their place of origin, their occupation, educational attainments, etc. She then selected 477 Confederate soldiers and 657 Union soldiers to focus on because their collected backgrounds were representative of the armies as a whole. She also uncovered some 100+ regimental papers (largely published by enlisted men) and used them as well.

What were the causes of the Civil War? Some say slavery. Others say it was state's rights vs. preserving the union. But what about the soldiers, the enlisted men who fought the war, what did they think? Were they as racist as we now perceive? Were they fighting for their homes? For their country? Why did our country fight its most horrific, most bloody war for four long years, amongst itself? What possibly could start and sustain such a conflict? Historians, history books, modern thinking have all created certain perceptions of the war, and, for the most part, tried to rewrite history to make it more comfortable to us. This brilliant, magnificently thorough book is an examination of the thoughts and attitudes of the enlisted soldiers of the Civil War, Union and

Confederate, black and white, as represented in their letters, diaries, essays, newsletters, and other writings. Manning investigates their opinions on the causes and purposes of the war and slavery, which are one in the same. She brilliantly delves into how those opinions, thoughts, and attitudes were formed by the differing societies of the North and the South (particularly their religious beliefs, their societal demands, and class and gender roles), how this civil war would form a new definition of the United States. The Civil War, in four horrific years, absolutely revolutionized thought and society in the United States. Our country fought its most bloody, most horrific war, not only amongst itself, but due to racism. It is a shocking horror that racism can not only be that entrenched, but that motivating of a force. A force that can cause a Civil War between the ideals of equality and freedom and the personal desires for safety, success, and preservation of loved ones.

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