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James M. McPherson. *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. xviii + 237 pp. $25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-509023-9.

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Whether one stands on Winstead Hill and peers across the open space over which thousands of southerners went to their deaths against Union lines at Franklin or gazes into the gentle slopes that remain of the gaping tear in Confederate lines known as the Crater, the visitor to such battlegrounds cannot help but wonder why. Why did these valiant men of so long ago risk almost certain death or maiming to hurl themselves against their opponents at Antietam, Kennesaw Mountain, or Cold Harbor? What force propelled these men to endure the hardships and dangers of camp and battle from 1861 to 1865? Such was the basic question–why?–for which Pulitzer Prize-winning author and historian James McPherson wrote *For Cause and Comrades*.

McPherson sought his answers from a sample of over a thousand collections of the writings of Civil War soldiers from both sides of the conflict. He chose to use 647 Union and 429 Confederate collections, encompassing some 25,000 letters and 249 diaries. Wisely, the author excluded soldier memoirs from his data base, deeming them of questionable value, given their primarily commercial or nostalgic nature and the distance in time from the events being discussed to the point of publication. Instead, he concentrated upon those writings which could offer him and his readers, "the immediacy of the experience," since such writers "were not looking back from years later through a haze of memory and myth about the Civil War" (p. 100).

Although generally commendable as a means of handling his subject, one important weakness in this approach was the author's tendancy to assume that people meant what they said and said what they meant simply because the act of writing itself was in closer proximity to the events. In point of fact, people often do not know themselves why they are acting or have acted as they have done. Thus, the letters, in particular, will be much more than merely conduits of information from soldiers at the front to family members at home. In any event, these materials are enormously valuable, and McPherson usually handles them well.

McPherson asserts from the outset that he will challenge "some of the conventional wisdom about the motives and mentalites of Civil War soldiers" (p. x). One of the areas where this proved to be the case was the author's assessment of factors commonly associated with the preparation of men for battle. "The traditional means of motivating soldiers to fight are training, discipline and leadership" (p. 46). He found that Civil War soldiers were deficient in the first category, weak in the second one, and initially shaky in the third.

While this conclusion may be true in a general sense, the author overstates his point. Civil War soldiers may not have prepared themselves, or been prepared by others, for combat as well as their twentieth-century counterparts, but they endured the drill and discipline they received and complained often enough about it that we know drill was a significant part of their lives and expectations.

To be sure, the men of both sides balked at the regimentation and discipline required of them by army life. Yet, one could not have witnessed the dressing of the lines under fire at Gettysburg during Pickett's and Pettigrew's assault on the third day, for instance, without understanding the amount of preparation for battle, both mental and physical, these men had undergone. And these were the notoriously independent-minded Confederates.

But, on a larger scale, McPherson's arguments make sense, as does his organization. He wants to know the Civil War soldier's initial motivation for enlisting, what sustained them or kept them in the army, and what impelled them to face combat. As one might expect, he finds a variety of factors at work, whether in determining motivation for enlistment or for battle. "Yet for Civil War soldiers," McPherson explains, "the group cohesion and peer pressure that were powerful factors in combat mo-

tivation were not unrelated to the complex mixture of patriotism, ideology, concept of duty, honor and manhood, and community or peer pressure that prompted them to enlist in the first place" (p. 13).

Some of the author's conclusions will be self-evident. Obviously, those individuals who desired to experience combat before actually doing so, quickly found such feelings satiated by the reality of the battlefield, prompting them to be considerably more circumspect when asked to repeat the experience. Even so, many did, and McPherson offers interesting insights into why they did.

Perhaps surprising to some will be the author's observation that only 20 percent of the 429 Confederate soldiers in the book's sample "explicitly voiced proslavery convictions (p. 110). More widely understood, and reflected in the sample here, was the mix of emotions expressed by Federals over the issues of race and war. Still, McPherson concludes that by 1864, "most Northern soldiers had broadened their conception of liberty to include black people" (p. 116).

By and large, McPherson does a great service with *For Cause and Comrades*. He is particularly noted for his writing style and this book will not disappoint on that score. Often the story is poignant and powerful. Perhaps most pleasing, at least to this reviewer, the author has done justice to the men of both sides, who left home innocent of what they were about to experience and yet created for themselves, on the whole, a reputation of valor and honor from out of the crucible of war.

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