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Peter S. Carmichael. *The War for the Common Soldier: How Men Thought, Fought, and Survived in Civil War Armies.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018. 408 pp. $34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4696-4309-0.

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Peter S. Carmichael's *The War for the Common Soldier* is, above all else, a pragmatic book. In highlighting the defining characteristics of the men who fought and suffered through the Civil War, Carmichael seeks to bridge a widening rift between more popular celebratory and heroic accounts of soldiers that began shortly after the end of the war—and, advanced most notably by Bell Wiley, continue, in some form to the present day—and an increasingly critical view of the rank and file as unfortunate pawns who, misled by the nationalism that sparked a misguided rush to the colors, found themselves trapped in an unforgiving machine that resulted in misery and death for far too many, a view that seems to have some appeal to those interested in the "darker" aspects of the sectional conflict.[1] Thus, the author joins with Union soldier Amos Judson in pushing back against a "sentimental culture with its enshrinement of extreme courage and its sanitation of the war's most grotesque elements" (p. 230), while still revealing the laudable conduct and mental agility of soldiers in both armies. As the double entendre in his title suggests, Carmichael seeks to both explore the experience for the common soldier as well as weigh in on the historiographical debate over how he should be remembered. In doing so, the author provides a very useful theoretical construct for understanding how Civil War soldiers conceptualized, endured, and remembered their wartime experiences.

In arguing for a defining sense of pragmatism among the soldiers of both armies, Carmichael suggests that they were neither the ideologues suggested by works such as James McPherson's *For Cause and Comrades* and Gary Gallagher's *The Union War,* nor the helpless victims of a wasteful and destructive conflict.[2] Instead, they adapted to their conditions, rationalized both the incredible losses around them and their own, at times remorseful survival, and pragmatically faced the numerous challenges, be they mental, physical, or emotional. Though their idealism often eroded, the author argues that a pragmatic philosophy "never left Northern or Southern soldiers standing on the barren ground of nihilism" (p. 99). Well grounded in the relevant secondary literature, but relying extensively on soldiers' letters, Carmichael counters the usual technique of using short snippets to support an argument by developing longer case studies, or "microhistories" of certain soldiers to place their evolving thoughts in context, resulting, in a nod to Clifford Geertz, in a "thick description approach" (p. 175). Most of the seven chapters (though several deviate from this format) rely on from three to six of

these case studies to provide soldiers' conceptions of the war, from resisting the temptation to desert to staying connected with the home front to rationalizing the hand of providence's role in victory or defeat.

While the examples (apparently despite the best efforts of Earl Hess) skew heavily toward the Army of the Potomac and the Army of Northern Virginia, the larger numbers serving in the eastern theater probably justify the greater emphasis. In an acknowledgement of the growing importance of the subfield of guerrilla studies, Carmichael feels compelled to include a full paragraph on why he chose to exclude this group, despite "some of the most exciting and engaging scholarship coming out of the field of Civil War history," as "its inclusion would have diverted attention away from my primary focus on conventional armies" (p. 13). The result is a fairly comprehensive cultural and intellectual history of the common soldier that largely overcomes concerns about representativeness, though Carmichael accepts that "no single individual can possibly represent the 2.7 million men who served in the Union forces and the 1.2 to 1.4 million men who stood in the ranks of the Confederate military. There was no common soldier in the Civil War" (p. 12). But the wealth of resources available on those soldiers who ran afoul of the military's justice system results in a slight overrepresentation of that demographic.

The work is organized topically, beginning with communities that soldiers created in the army ("Comrades, Camp, and Community"), what historians of other conflicts have labeled the "primary group."[3] A soldier's messmates often had a direct influence on how resilient an individual soldier was, and the destruction of the primary group could lead to a loss of morale, health, and eventually life, as was the case with Confederate soldier John Futch (p. 218). Chapters on soldiers' faith and dispositions ("Providence and Cheerfulness"), letters home ("Writing Home"), and combat motivation ("Courage and Cowardice") follow, all with an emphasis on how individual soldiers adopted pragmatic approaches to resolving, for example, travails of their faith, the disconnect with the romantic image of the war that pervaded the home front, and the irrepressible urge to avoid lethal combat, either by desertion or simple "malingering" when the ball opened. In one case study, Carmichael reveals that Union soldier David Beem was certainly not the first, nor the last, to find his devotion to his spouse and his country in direct conflict, and while he eventually overcame this difficulty, the struggle still left him bereft of essential emotional support. The final three chapters address the dire consequences for those who did flee, and the armies' sometimes futile efforts to dissuade it ("Desertion and Military Justice"), the difficulty of enduring defeat on the battlefield ("Facing the Enemy and Confronting Defeat"), and, in a nod to an increasing emphasis on the war's material culture ("The Trophies of Victory and the Relics of Defeat"), the way soldiers collected relics and preserved mementoes of what was, for many, the defining moments of their lives.[4] The result is a series of topical chapters that roughly parallel a soldier's wartime experience, from finding a new home to dealing with the challenges of service to the final acts and the efforts to collect trophies and preserve keepsakes from the war, yet another aspect of the American military experience that extends across multiple conflicts.

The heavy reliance on soldiers' letters brings forward some questions of authenticity. Just as the "observer effect" in physics highlights the difficulty of measuring a system without fundamentally altering it, so too do letters provide incomplete access to a soldier's thoughts and feelings. Though Carmichael argues that soldiers were often remarkably candid in relaying their frustrations with the war to an audience back home, the letters were always written for someone else's consumption and, given the dearth of news from "the front," were often shared among family

members and even reprinted in local newspapers. Thus, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to know exactly what a soldier was thinking. Indeed, Carmichael acknowledges, "letters are neither transparent windows into the author's mind nor unmediated statements that reveal why men fought" (p. 11). In addition, soldiers, like other human beings, experienced a range of emotions, endured highs and lows, and alternately expressed support for or frustration with their cause and the prosecution of the war. Though Carmichael uses multiple letters from the same author, supplemented with additional information to level out these characteristic highs and lows and tease out true feelings, soldiers' deepest inner thoughts still remain somewhat opaque.

In the end, Carmichael's laudable efforts to understand the common soldier and strip away the romance from his years of service by highlighting the suffering, misery, and fearful destruction of life and property, may have the ironic effect of increasing support for the heroic interpretation of Civil War soldiers. After all, the worse historians make the war, the more we elevate the efforts and sacrifices of those who endured, and finally won it. As Oliver Wendell Holmes, whom Carmichael uses to introduce and conclude the volume, observed, "I think there is a kind of heroism in the endurance" (p. 311). Despite the best efforts of those who would recast the Civil War as a national tragedy, which it certainly was, though it was not an episode of wanton destruction devoid of meaning or purpose, the conflict and the soldiers who fought it retain an aura of nobility and are still lionized, rightly or wrongly, by elements of their respective societies. As the British philosopher John Stuart Mill, a contemporary of the conflict, wrote specifically about the "Contest in America," "War is an ugly thing, but not the ugliest of things: the decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks nothing worth a war, is worse.... As long as justice and injustice have not terminated their ever-renewing fight for ascendancy in the affairs of mankind, human beings must be willing, when need is, to do battle for the one against the other."[5] In additional to peeling back the layers that have obscured Civil War soldiers' cultural, emotional, and intellectual history, Carmichael's work goes a long way toward helping those who might support, or participate in, future conflicts to understand how their predecessors met and overcame significant challenges when called to face their own iterations of injustice.

Notes

[1]. Bell Wiley, ***The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union*** (Indianapolis, IN: Charter Books, 1952), and ***The Life of Johnny Reb: The Common Soldier of the Confederacy*** (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1943).

[2]. James McPherson, ***For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War*** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Gary Gallagher, ***The Union War*** (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

[3]. See Omer Bartov, ***Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich*** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

[4]. See, for example, Joan Cashin, ***War Stuff: The Struggle for Human and Environmental Resources in the American Civil War*** (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[5]. John Stuart Mill, "The Contest in America," in ***Dissertations and Discussions: Political, Philosophical, and Moral*** (Boston: William Spencer, 1868), vol. 1, 26.

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