

Review of the book
what they fought for
by james m.
mcpherson



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What They Fought For is a collection of personal letters/journal entries written by those who fought in the American Civil War. These entries shed a light on why the individual soldier fought in this bloody war. The author conveys that most of these men had senses of commitment to patriotism. In these letters, not only did they speak about why they were fighting, but also about the hardships and issues. These insights are able to show how the soldiers had thought in great detail about the ideological issues of the war that had not previously been seen. Slavery was crucial as a factor in this war. The North wanted the abolition of slavery, using both morality and pragmatism as their defense. The South, however, believed it to be a way of life, economically and socially speaking. Based on what was previously said about the sectionalism between the north and the south combined with these letters, the author is able to show how diverse personal beliefs and motives were for being involved in the war.

Some of these reasons for being involved in the war ranged from protecting what they believed to be morally right, all the way to not even having a single clue as to why. Some of the ones in between were soldiers believing they were standing up for what was right or fighting to preserve what the founding fathers had defended, the Declaration of Independence.

A major shift happens in this book around the time of the Emancipation Proclamation, where you can see both the attitudes of the Southerners change, but also those in the north change too. After the Emancipation Proclamation was put into effect, it intensified a morale crisis in the Union armies. Many left the Union and the Confederates armies. Some explained why by stating, " I am the Boy who Can fight for my Country, but not for the <https://assignbuster.com/review-of-the-book-what-they-fought-for-by-james-m-mcpherson/>

Negros.” This sent the Union army into an all-time low with a series of disasters and morale decreasing. However, the Union gained some blacks who were freed and could enlist. The south grew increasingly aggravated with the north and this policy but the news of this hadn't reached all the way down in Texas until Lee had already surrendered.

What They Fought For had a clear and concise thesis. Through the letters used, the author was able to convey a central thesis that soldiers on both sides fought for a large extent, mostly on the notion of honor and duty, or strength and courage. The author chose very specific letters to use in this short book. The author used many different letters that had the same central idea. This shows that McPherson did extensive research studying the many reasons behind each letter/diary entry written to put it all together in one very organized book.

McPherson did extensive research on these letters and only getting them from reliable sources. Some of these sources include the US Military History Institute, the University of Carolina, Duke University and the Huntington Library. The author is attempting to achieve the recreation of an accurate depiction of life of soldiers and families who lived during the Civil War by examining and studying all of these letters. Other examples of the extensive amount of research he did were seen in the statistics that he presented in his book as well as the many sources in which he had. Using one source could prove to be reliable; however, using a variety of sources gives the reader a full overview and complete trust in the authenticity and full background research behind this book.

However, letters can be subject to opinion. These soldiers were in a war, and many endorphins could be flowing, much heartache and emotions too. This could lead to the idea that some of these were biased in some sort of way, or a little bit blown out of proportion on both sides of the US. To add on to this, a certain mindset could have been “hammered” into their head and they weren’t really thinking for themselves, rather they were following what their side was believing. This was seen when the author observed that few of the soldiers sampled for the Confederacy had publicly (explicitly) voiced proslavery views in their writings.

McPherson sometimes overstates his point about how chaotic the war was however. These soldiers may have not had much training or expertise in the area surrounding the war, but they were given discipline and drill which was said to be a significant part of their lives in the war. It was the one thing they knew for sure. They didn’t know stability during the war, so their discipline or expectations was one thing they knew they could rely on to be stable. He wanted to show some of the chaos that was seen in the war, but he overshot it by just explaining that one viewpoint of this instead of showing how discipline was important.

Overall, the author is able to present a very clear and concise thesis that is seen throughout the entire book stating that soldiers on both sides fought for a large extent, mostly on the idea that soldiers on both sides fought for their courage and strength as well as honor and duty. McPherson did plenty of research to convey these ideas through many letters and diary entries written by the soldiers in the American Civil War. This gives readers firsthand accounts as to what was going through these soldiers’ heads during this

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arduous time. He goes into great depth in covering just about all sides and aspects that can be seen from the war and presents it with dates and a deep explanation. There will always be a way to criticize someone and it just so happened to be in the problem that these letters can show almost too much emotion and almost become biased and shy away from the thesis, but for the most part, he stayed on track and was able to write a strong book that appeals to many readers as they can get a primary viewpoint from the American Civil War instead of the traditional history books.