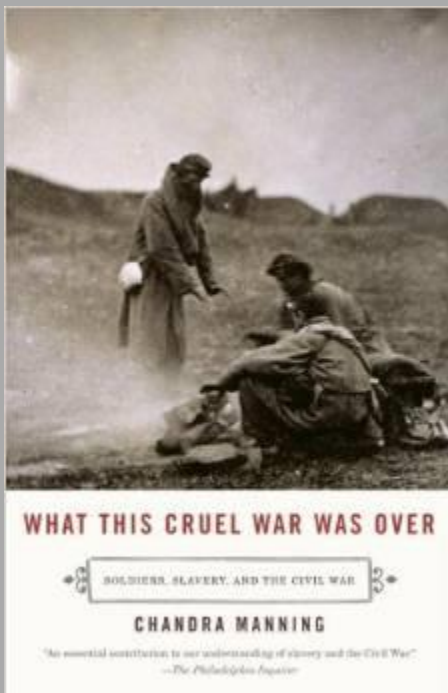


Book Review

What This Cruel War Was Over

By Chandra Manning

Knopf, New York (2007)



When it comes to Civil War issues, especially those that do not involve battles or commanders, perhaps no other issue has sparked as much debate as that of why the Civil War was fought.

For many of us who were taught in Northern School systems, we were usually taught that the Civil War was fought because of the rather simplistic issue of slavery. However as we became Civil War aficionados and extended our reading resources we often encountered other explanations, such as preserving states rights, or perhaps the South's desire to maintain economic status by adopting lower tariff rates, or perhaps the desire of the

Southern, slave states to maintain political dominance at the national level, dominance that seemed threatened by disproportionate population growths, which in turn helped to explain Lincoln's election.

Or perhaps our attitudes were influenced by popular media, such as *Gone With the Wind*, a highly popular book made into an even more popular movie, that tended romantically to portray the Confederacy as trying to pursue some noble objectives and allowed the reader and/or movie goer to believe that slaves were treated with benevolence in return for which the slaves remained largely loyal to their masters. Or perhaps the Civil War student was always exposed to the sort of textbooks used in Southern schools that created, perpetuated and maintained after-the-fact rationalizations for the South's secession. See McPherson's *This Mighty Scourge, Perspectives on the Civil War*, (2007), reviewed in the March 2007 issue of *DrumTaps*.

Now Chandra Manning, Ph. D., an Assistant Professor of History at Georgetown University, has examined hundreds of letters, and to a lesser extent diaries, from Civil War enlisted men, the common soldiers, Union and Confederate, Black and white, to show that our high school history books were right in the first instance, specifically the war was fought over slavery with any other issue being a distant second. Dr. Manning shows that of course the respective perspectives were different and indeed shifted in detail during the course of the four year struggle. In short the Northern soldiers quickly realized that slavery was the reason why the Southern States seceded while at the same time the Southern soldiers believed that maintenance of slavery was the almost exclusive reason for pursuing their rebellion, an attitude that was sorely tested when at the very end of the Civil War the Confederacy formed its own units of Black soldiers.

Of particular interest to this Northern white fellow is how nonslave owning Southern white men viewed slavery as the essence of their own manhood, so important that they were will to sacrifice their own lives even if their families were too poor to own slaves. It's also interesting to see that the Confederate soldiers were not especially loyal to the Confederate government but viewed governance by Lincoln and his administration as a fate almost worse than death.

At the same time Manning shows that Union soldiers did not necessarily equate the abolition of slavery with the establishment of equal rights for Blacks. However, almost from very early months of the war, most Union soldiers contended that the successful abolishment of slavery would vitiate any reason for the continuation of the secession.

Relying as it does upon so many pieces of correspondence, this book – while well written -- is not a particularly easy read, and at times seems repetitive as it advances chronologically through the war. Furthermore, since the author makes her premise clear from the onset of her book, there is little sense of suspense about the outcome of the book. Nevertheless, this book contains important nuggets of information and insights right up to the very end, and should be regarded as an important, if not essential, resource for those interested in understanding the context of the great struggle for the nation's heart and soul, a struggle that continues to this very day. For instance, after reading this book, one can easily understand the abhorrence of many African-American citizens about contemporary displays of the Stars

and Bars. In his review of the same book, William C. Davis, author of more than 40 books about the Civil War, may say it best when he describes book as "...history at its best. ... [That] deserves a spot as required reading."

Submitted by David Frey
05.26.07