

At the Point of a Sword

The Civil War. The War Between the States. Whatever you call it, that war holds a fascination for Americans like no other action in our national history. Thomas Eishen has used that to craft a novel around two of the participants in that war: 2d Lt. Robert Wicker, CSA, and Col., Joshua Chamberlain, USA. Both are historical figures of the time and their actions are fully documented in available sources. Eishen has lifted them out of those dry historical accounts and given them character.

He could have developed this as two stories. Young lieutenant Robert Wicker is haunted by fear that he will prove to be a coward in battle. Although having been elected by his men, he has been passed over for promotion to command. With a sense of impending disaster and a dislike of the new commander, he nevertheless struggles to do his best for his men. In the end, he proves his valor but loses the fight and is captured by the Union forces.

Joshua Chamberlain, a teacher at Bowdoin College, commanded the Maine Twentieth Regiment at the Battle of Gettysburg. A humanitarian and a man of principle, he found it impossible to order the execution of deserters turned over to him for disposition. He, like young Wicker, fought a battle with himself, his being duty to country or duty to humanity. He did not shoot the deserters. But he ordered the bayonet charge that turned the tide of battle on Little Round Top.

In so doing he was brought face to face with Wicker. That is historical fact. And that is where Eishen brings the two stories together to complete this novel.

In structure the book alternates sections between the Union point of view and the Confederate, telling both stories in parallel. This allows the reader to see events as the participants would have seen them. The action takes place on the battlefield at Gettysburg on the day of battle and one or two preceding days. Events are described graphically, true to the cruel and barbaric acts that are close-contact warfare. Initial revulsion and then acceptance lets a corpse become a protective bulwark - or a pillow.

A vast amount of research went into the making of this book. The characters are real, taken from documents of the time. Conversations attributed to those characters are, of course, a product of the author's imagination. The events are real. Sometimes individual actions within those events may be made up but, for the most part, even they are based on hard research. The book includes three and a half pages of recommended reading

Eishen has not attempted to tell the story of the generals and their battle plans. He has not concerned himself with military tactics except as they affect the actions of his characters. He has not made moral statements about the tightness of either cause. He has concerned himself with the tale of two soldiers whom fate brought together at the point of a sword.

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