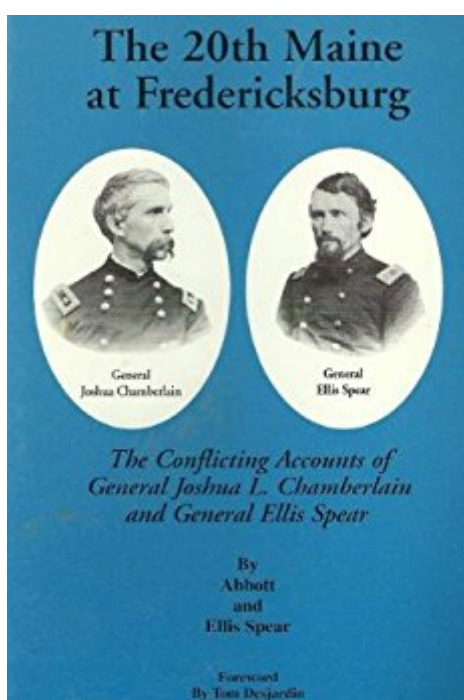


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The 20th Maine At Fredericksburg: The Conflicting Accounts Of General Joshua L. Chamberlain And General Ellis Spear



Synopsis

Ellis Spear's experiences in the Civil War were similar in many ways to most of the other volunteer officers who served, North or South, but despite the shared experience, his writings set themselves apart from most other reminiscences of the war. During the first decade and a half after the war, an understandably depressed American mood caused the conflict to be viewed as an ugly, terrible event, and few veterans published their recollections or spoke publicly about their war years. As the wounds began to heal in the 1880's, however, the war came to be viewed in a less negative light. The experience of having fought in the war became an important badge of honor in American communities and participation in particular battles or service in particular units became a source of pride for veterans. Ellis Spear never made this transformation in the way many other veterans did. To him, war remained a miserable, horrifying experience to be mourned rather than glorified, and he had good reason to feel this way. In the spring of 1862, he set out with a group of young prominent friends to recruit and form companies of volunteer infantrymen for the Union Army. Each of these men was given a commission as captain of the company that they helped raise. These circumstances left Spear in an uncomfortable and unenviable position. In recruiting soldiers from the small towns and villages along the Maine coast, Spear never forgot the experience of taking young men from their wives, children, and mothers. One mother even drove him from the property at the point of a pitchfork. Having convinced them to serve in the army, Spear felt a responsibility toward his troops, and when he later found himself in the position of ordering them into danger, and on too many occasions seeing to their burial, his view of war as a negative experience was permanently formed. Burdened with this responsibility, and the loss of his best friend Sam Keene, who died in his arms at Petersburg, Spear found the "vain glorying" of veterans in the 1880s and 1890s both foolhardy and irritating. As the public came to view the war in a more positive light, Spear's feelings of contempt naturally increased as well. Perhaps no veteran of the war was the subject of greater myth-making than Spear's commander at Gettysburg, Joshua Chamberlain. Chamberlain was a professor of Spear's at Bowdoin College, and the two men maintained a friendly relationship after the war. But the legend of Chamberlain's actions on Little Round Top, not necessarily created or fueled by its subject, increasingly nettled Spear. This myth, which surrounded Chamberlain in a cloak of glory and honor, represented all that Spear despised about shifting attitudes toward the war. While remaining friendly toward Chamberlain himself, Spear railed at the myth that gave him all the credit for the regiment's actions on Little Round Top, particularly as it seemed to ignore the other men who fought, and especially the sacrifices of the men who died there. In "My Story of Fredericksburg" the line between myth and the person of Chamberlain blurred in Spear's mind, and

he lashed out at both. While Spear's grandson, Abbott, has helped us to understand some of the details on which Ellis took issue with Chamberlain's account, it is also important to remember that both of these stories were written more than a half century after the events in question. Whether the varying Fredericksburg accounts of Spear and Chamberlain were affected by time, blurred perceptions, or simply old age, remain for the reader to decide. However, the writings contained herein come from the unusual point of view of a veteran who, though certainly worthy of the highest praise and glory for his Civil War record, viewed the war in a manner which is very different from the literature of his day. And for this reason, it is both interesting and highly revealing.

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