Fields Of Battle By John Keegan Essay, Research Paper

Fields of Battle:

The Wars for North America

John Keegan, the author of Fields of Battle: The Wars for North America (334 pgs), is a very distinguished military historian. Keegan attended Oxford University, in England, his place of birth. He was Delmas Distinguished Professor of History at Vassar in fall 1997. He was a Fellow of Princeton University in 1984 and Lecturer in Military History at Cambridge, 1986-87. From 1960-1986 he was Senior Lecturer in Military History at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst. Since 1986 he has been Defense Editor of The Daily Telegraph. He was awarded the OBE in the Gulf War honors list, 1991. He is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and a Doctor of Laws of the University of New Brunswick. He is a Visitor of Hugh Sexey’s Hospital, Bruton, and is a Trustee of the National Heritage Memorial and Heritage Lottery Funds. He was the BBC Reith Lecturer for 1998, and has lectured at countless other places around the world. John Keegan is also the author of many other military-history books like The Face of Battle, The Second World War, Who’s Who in Military History, and A History of Warfare, to name a few. Despite being English, Keegan professes his love for America, but interestingly, not for Americans. Keegan says that he has visited America more than fifty times, whether for business or pleasure, but never even hints at having the desire to make the good ole’ U.S.A. his place of residence. Nonetheless, he certainly has a great knowledge of North America and its history of warfare.

Fields of Battle: The Wars for North America is sort of a semi-autobiography of John Keegan’s life. At the beginning, end, and countless parts throughout the book, Keegan makes references to trips to America, his childhood conceptions of America, places he has lectured, famous people he met (Bill Clinton included), and old battlefields he has visited. The rest of the book contains very detailed accounts of the major battles fought on North American soil. This begins with the settling of North America by the British and French and their battle for dominance. Next, Keegan covers The Revolutionary War (or The War of Independence, as it is called in England). Then we are informed about the Civil War, wars against the native Indians, and finally about the invention of the airplane and its importance and effect on warfare in more recent years.

Fields of Battle was written to be a history book with the added focus on geography’s role in America’s warfare. Keegan points out that American warfare was different from European warfare, because those who fought battles on American soil were unfamiliar with the landscape on which they were waging war, while Europe was settled thousands of years before North America was. He says, “It is not accidental that Champlain, the founder of French Canada, was a skilled mapmaker or that George Washington, the victor of the War of American Independence, was by profession a surveyor who had recorded the topography of wide areas of the back country over which he was later to campaign” (09). That is certainly an excellent point to make. They fought European wars on the North American landscape. Undoubtedly, this was a large factor in our victory over England in the Revolutionary War. The Americans had a far better understanding of the land, while maps were largely unavailable to England.

Keegan made another very good point at the beginning of Fields of Battle. He said that the inscription on The Statue of Liberty welcoming in the tired, poor, huddled masses yearning to breathe free, coupled with the tracings of the star-shaped bastions of Fort Wood (used in defense against the British Royal Navy) is a paradox. Here America is beckoning people to come and start a new life within her borders, whereas she spent the last two hundred years of her existence, kicking people out. The British kicked out the French, the “Americans” kicked out the British, and the Americans (for the purpose of following form, I would like to say “kicked out”) rid themselves of trouble with Indians. Keegan guesses that this is the theme of his book, but never touches upon it again.

It is a little harder than expected to simply classify Fields of Battle as a military-history book about the wars fought on American soil. First of all, and it was mentioned earlier, this book is sort of autobiographical of John Keegan’s life and encounters with America. The entire first chapter is devoted to Keegan’s explaining his perspective and experiences of our country and our neighbor to the north. Also, Fields of Battle contains something that most other history books do not: a little bit of drama and suspense. These two are present throughout the book, but they are especially evident in the parts about Custer and his “Last Stand.” In addition, after Keegan told of the many mistakes on the part of McClellan, in overestimating the size of the Confederate’s forces, one feels a bit happy to see him relieved of his duty. In the piece about the invention of the airplane, a good deal of pages solely describe the life and times if the brothers Wright. Of what importance this serves, it is hard to find. The main substance of Fields of Battle is Keegan’s analyses of major battles, not of wars. Keegan did not describe the how the Civil War started, and he only briefly described how it ended.

As stated earlier, the entire first chapter of Fields of Battle, entitled “One Englishman’s America,” is necessary, but it is also too long. The reader needs to know about Keegan’s many trips to America so that his credentials can be established, but they do not need to know that Keegan thinks American pilots sound like Walter Matthau. Keegan probably should have drawn the line at describing the slowness of American conversations, but it is often entertaining to hear a foreigner analyze and critique the American way of life. Keegan opens the book on a light-hearted tone, indirectly outlining his intentions and goals in writing it. Of all the things Keegan says about himself, one thing oddly seemed missing: why he chose his line of work. Keegan does not write about just American history, so no inquiry is needed as to why he wrote this particular book, but why military history altogether?

The second chapter of Fields of Battle, “The Forts of New France,” is rather devoid of any fighting until the end. Keegan describes how, through Cartier and Champlain, France settled in North America. The French did not have large numbers in America – under 100,000 – who did not seek to raise families there either. The French were mostly fur trappers, seeking to make money back home. The English, on the other hand, came to North America to start over and get away from the English monarchy. The English raised large families and got into skirmishes with the natives. Once the English got rid of the Indians, they sought to get rid of the French as well. The first part of the chapter deals with the settling of America by the French and English and the building of forts for the eventual Seven Years War, that the latter part of the chapter covers. The chapter provides a good setup and introduction to all of the conflicts that would eventually erupt in North America.

The third chapter of Fields of Battle, “The Fort at Yorktown,” is tough to get through and rather boring, to be frank. Keegan tosses in quite a bit of names and battles that are impossible to remember. Still, it is very informative and provides superb insight into the details of the Revolutionary War and its events. The term boring is used to describe this chapter, because it wholly lacks any of the drama and excitement that accompanies a country’s fight and eventual attainment of independence. The war was something of a classic David and Goliath story, where the underdog that everybody roots for comes from behind and beats the big, bad enemy that was treating America unfairly. Unfortunately, Keegan chose not to capitalize on the factor of entertainment. It is doubtful, however, that many of the people who choose to read Fields of Battle are looking for this type of entertainment. They will not be disappointed.

Redeeming himself from the last chapter, “Fortifying the Confederacy” is a much superior chapter than “The Fort at Yorktown.” Yes this chapter does not really give a lead in to the reason for the Civil War, but it does not need to. Any American who is going to read a book such as this, is guaranteed to already know. Anyway, it was funny to read how the Union pretty much had the Civil War sowed up, until they put McClellan in charge of the Peninsular Campaign. At one point, McClellan retreated from an army that was less than one-third of the size of his army, because he thought the Confederate army outnumbered his. One thing that was really funny was when McClellan sent a telegraph to Lincoln, saying that Washington pretty much left him out to dry by not sending him more troops, that it will not be his fault if he is beaten, but all his skill if he wins. This is not a humorous book, but it should not be taken too seriously.

“Forts on the Plains” seems to be the chapter that Keegan knew the least about. That is probably because, of all the wars fought on American soil, there is probably the least amount of information available to research about those waged against the Indians. This chapter offers a good buildup of how we came to kick the Indians off of their land. Keegan describes how the United States Government constantly displaced Indians, as Americans expanded their zone of living, until there was no place else to put them, and they got really hostile. It was interesting to learn that the war against the Indians was postponed because of the Civil War, and that the army that did do battle with the Indians was a large step down in quality than it was twenty years ago. Also the theories on what happened to Custer and his army were interesting.

“Flying Fortresses” was a good idea that went bad. Keegan spent the whole book describing battles fought in America, and then he starts talking about the airplane. Now this is important, in that the airplane did change the way wars were fought. However, hearing all about the Orvilles’ lives and their parallels to that of the Eisenhowers’ was very unnecessary and uninteresting. Keegan did end Fields of Battle on a good note; he deserves that, what was he thinking when he wrote the pages just before the end?

While reading Fields of Battle, I learned some important things that I did not know or thought to the contrary. I did not know that George Washington lost some battles during his military career. In modern America, Washington is portrayed mainly as a politician and our nation’s first president- now I know why more focus is not given to the battles that he fought against the British. I did not know that the first Africans were brought to America in 1619, to Jamestown, Virginia. I had not really given much thought as to when the first Africans were brought to America, but I guess I thought it was later. I learned that, before becoming a Civil War hero and the President of the United States, Grant was a failure. Apparently the Civil War did for Grant what World War 2 did for Winston Churchill. Finally, and this is not very important, I always thought that Illinois was part of the Great Plains. When Keegan listed the ten states that were, Illinois sadly was not one of them.

Fields of Battle is not for everyone. It is probably intended to supplement what you would read about these wars in an encyclopedia or a general history book. Fields of Battle is very specific, and Keegan expects the reader to have a decent amount of pre-existing knowledge about the history of American warfare. This book is not for someone looking for the entertainment value found in “Hollywood war.” It is not totally or intentionally boring, but that is the way it seems sometimes. You must really have a genuine interest in the subject matter to fully enjoy and reap the benefits of Fields of Battle.

It is truly mind-boggling to think about all of the information contained in Fields of Battle. John Keegan found out some very remote details about battles that occurred over two hundred years ago. It is very surprising that information such as the time of day that some remote thing in the battle happened or how many men were lost on a certain day or the mindset of a general before a battle. Stuff like that is amazing. Keegan deserves an extraordinary amount of credit for researching things like that – many must have been very hard to find – and then intricately piecing them together to form the chronological outline of a battle. Also, for almost all of the battles described in Fields of Battle, Keegan analyzes the battle and tells what went wrong in a general’s plan, or what they should have done in order to prove successful. Taking the time to meticulously scrutinize battles that took place so long ago requires a true passion for warfare. Keegan certainly has that passion. Most history books are not even nearly as detailed as Fields of Battle, and several people write them. Keegan wrote this book on his own. He also took the battles, and brought them down to a personal level. Because the book is so descriptive and analytical, the reader can actually have a vivid picture of what the battle looked like. Keegan says that he tries to visit every battlefield he can. He does a fine job of transmitting his picture through the book.

It is very important for anyone who has a real interest for military history of any kind to read a book such as this. Keegan laid down the straightforward facts of the battles he described and added his own interpretation. Keegan never forces his view or opinion on the reader. He is a British man, but he shows no bitter feelings in describing the defeat of his own people in battle. He freely professes his love for a country that overcame his in a true test of strength. Of course, we are all friends now, so it does not really matter.

I would like to meet Keegan in person. I found the times when he spoke of his experiences the most interesting parts of Fields of Battle. From the way he talks about himself and his experiences, he seems to me a very knowledgeable person. Unfortunately, I am not terribly interested in the subject matter to which he has devoted his life. I still feel that he is a good writer, and I would probably be a fan of his if he wrote in a genre, that I have a passion for, with the skill, accuracy, and quality with which he writes military history. His books are no doubt important, as is history in general. That is a hot debate, but then again the old saying goes, “history is doomed to repeat itself.” So if history is important, and it is, then this, and probably all other Keegan books, is important, because they are at the top of their game. Keegan did not really make any promises with Fields of Battle, so there were none to live up to. At times, I felt the book dragged and was quite boring, but as I stated earlier, it was not meant to entertain. It was meant to inform, and that it did. Fields of Battle is relatively new, but it is sure to stick around for quite a while to come. Many praise Keegan for his skill, and his books are sure to become instant classics.

Keegan brings up many good points in his book. I have already mentioned two. The third, and best one, comes on the last page of Fields of Battle: “War is repugnant to the people of the United States; yet it is war that has made their nation and it is through their power to wage war that they dominate the world.” There is little doubt that we dominate the world, and have been doing so for some time now. And that is the thing. America is a relatively young country. By now we have established our own identity, but in the beginning, Americans were just disgruntled British people. It was those people and their ancestors who dominated the world, and do so now. So I wonder if there is not just a little bit of pride in his thoughts, when Keegan speaks so lovingly about America.